

Authentic

SCIENCE FICTION MONTHLY 1/6

Nº40



This month's
FEATURED NOVEL

**The BEST LAND
SCHEME**
by Kelvin STRIKE

MAN APPROACHES MARS —
— HIS FIRST PLANET —

Short stories by: J. F. BURKE
DAN MORGAN

MARTIN JORDAN
M. DOCGE

VOLUME I No. 40
ONE SHILLING and SIXPENCE

Authentic

SCIENCE FICTION MONTHLY

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H.J. CAMPBELL

Writes...

Despite the charms of his native land, your editor is still, at the time of writing, beyond its shores. The time to return home is imminent, and the next editorial you read will certainly be written in England. But for now let me tell you about the new world slants on science fiction I have come across.

I am now in Canada—and can understand why so many of our readers live there. It is a wonderful country of mist and mountains and green grass, such as I have never seen outside England. The people are alive and progressive, looking with hope and confidence to the future. It is almost as though time travel were accomplished and this is the world a little ahead of the present. There is peace, plenty, progress. And science fiction holds its place tenaciously.

Most evident is the influence of science fiction on commercial advertising. Petroleum suppliers tell the new world how advanced in technique they are by sixteen-sheet posters depicting space stations and rocket ships. The pioneer spirit of space flight seems to

attract the people of this pioneer-descendant land. Children are not "protected" from the cut-out model spaceships on cereal packs, nor are they discouraged from collecting box tops and acquiring a space-man's helmet and raygun.

The attitude is realistic. This has got to come. Let's not hide from it. Let the kids grow up to accept the conquest of space as one more example of man's persistence and endurance.

All very encouraging. All very inspiring. And now that *Authentic* is so widely read in Canada, we can feel that we are a part of this great scheme of onward marching. *Authentic* has many good friends here. And I am pleased and proud to have met some of them.

So I have been editing our magazine at rather long range, but, thanks to an efficient airmail postal organisation, it has not been too difficult. I have managed to line up for you this month what I consider to be a pretty fine collection of stories.

There's *The Best Laid Scheme*, by Kelvin Strike, as the long novel,

and I hope you'll be as intrigued as I was by the long unequal fight to straighten up the world by a man who, seemingly, had all that it took.

Then, in the short story range, we have *Amateur Talent*, by Dan Morgan, a light-hearted story of an interplanetary theatrical impressario; *For You, The Possessed*, by J. F. Burke, the popular author of last month's long story; *Cuckoo*, by Martin Jordan, a story of alien infiltration with a surprising twist. Finally we introduce a new writer, M. Dogge, whose story, *The Inner Worlds and My Uncle*, will undoubtedly arouse a great deal of interest. A. P. Kift is this month's successful amateur writer — his story, *Go to the Ants*, being our fourth and final competition winner.

The third in our new series of scientific articles is on Extra-sensory Perception—a topic of perennial recurrence in science fiction, and one on which great controversy rages.

Next month I hope to review some fanzines that I picked up in America. These were given to me, personally, by their editors, who did a good job of selling me on their publications. There will also be a couple of pages of reviews of books that have accumulated during my absence. It is likely, too, that I

shall be able to give you the long-promised article by Charles Eric Maine on differing plot requirements requested by radio producer, film director and book editor for his creation, "Spaceways." This should be of great interest to the serious minded, analytical fan.

Seems time now for one of my philosophical gems! Trouble is that life in the new world does not lend itself overmuch to philosophy. Life here is more a matter of living than of thinking. And perhaps that will do as a topic on which to bend your thoughts during the coming month.

What way of life can best serve the interests of man that are dealt with in science fiction? Is it better to let thinking predominate, so that mental attitudes keep pace with technological developments, or to place the accent on *doing*, in order to ensure that there *will be* such developments?

Neither of these approaches, I think, are quite right. The only long-lasting approach to man's future is a blend of these ideas, and there is no good reason why thinking and doing should not be wedded into an efficient means of living.

By the way, to strike an old-fashioned note—I wish you all a Merry Christmas!

H.J.C.



The **BEST LAID** **SCHEME**

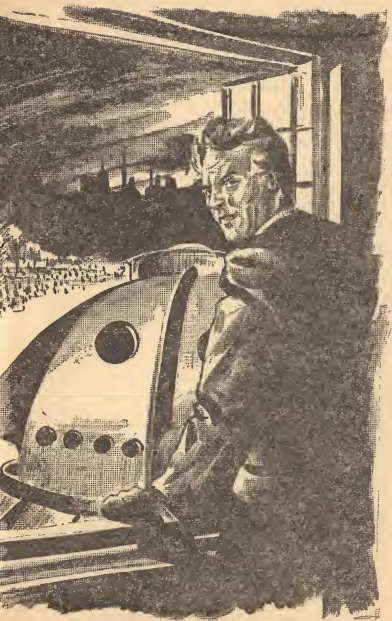
by Kelvin **STRIKE**

They came from the stars and demanded change—Earth had to be sensible or die, and one man was given the ultimate task.

~

THE SWIFT, soft, clicking of the electrotyper was the only sound in Stebbing Joseph's library. The paper roll made no noise as it slid smoothly into the machine and out again. It was sucked in, virgin white, then regurgitated by Stebbing's deft, precise fingers, covered with the infinitely articulate symbolism of the latest advance on Boolean algebraic logic.

First there had been Boole, building a symbolic, mathematical



system for the expression and manipulation of Aristotelean concepts. Then de Morgan analysed the relations and operations. Pierce came along and pushed the system a bit further, refining it, extending it, giving it a new power, a new impetus. In the early twentieth century, Frege had gone a little further along the road and turned the principles of valid thought into a calculus, even though that was not what he had set out to do. Russell and Whitehead then tried to complete Frege's analysis of mathematical operations, and logic became a thing of signs and constants. Words no longer mattered. The semanticists died overnight, almost.

In the twenty-first century, Vogel had made the Russell system look like elementary arithmetic. And in the twenty-second century Ferranti had run rings round Vogel. Ferranti, too, had been superseded—but not until the late twenty-fourth century. Einstein and Zwicky had been

left behind eons ago, their starkly mechanical physico-mathematical doctrines being found to be but simple expressions of superficial observation rather than of fundamental fact. Such things were taught in the elementary grades—but only as history, as once the phlogiston theory had been held up as an example of the ease with which trained observers fall into vulgar errors.

And now, around the middle of the twenty-fifth century, Stebbing Joseph was adding his contribution to systematised thought.

As yet, it had not been evaluated. That would come when the rippling paper from his electrotyper was duplicated in millions and flung around the solar system in a kind of celestial paper chase.

Even Stebbing was not sure of its value. Though his fleeting fingers never ceased their jabbing at the keys, his mind wondered, here and there, whether this piece or that piece was not *true*, not

right. Such concepts were long outmoded—but, well, *valuable*. He wondered whether they really formed an advance. They were his own thoughts, like the symbols, infinitely articulate, but inevitably subjective. He would have to wait and see. Wait and see what his contemporary logicians made of it.

In the warm, sweet air from the window that looked out onto the green countryside of Earth, Stebbing smiled. He could imagine what some of his contemporaries would make of it. Though disciplined thought had made such strides, though scientific knowledge had advanced in logarithmic progression, human nature was still the same as it had been when a long-forgotten minor physicist saw an apple fall and gave the world an utterly false conception of gravity.

Men were still men—unfortunately.

They still had hates and prides and loyalties and prejudices and loves and

jealousies. Mrs. O'Grady and the colonel's lady were still sisters under the skin. And they were made of so many things that were only skin deep.

Stebbing Joseph was fairly sure that he would come in for criticism and ridicule when his monograph was published. There were logicians who had other ideas than his. He thought perhaps that they were—not objective. But he recognised that he could be wrong.

Stebbing became aware of a sound above the clicking of the keys. For a moment he ignored it, keeping his level gaze fixed on the paper that held his new system. Then he stopped stabbing the keys and raised his head and stared expressionlessly towards the window.

It was an odd sound and he was at a loss to place it, to associate it with something that he already knew. He couldn't, and that was intriguing. Most intriguing.

Stebbing raised his long,

thin body from the flexic chair and it seemed loth to give him up. His bored-looking face a mask for his alert mind, he stepped across the book-lined room, skirted an electronic calculator and opened the door. The sound seemed to have decreased. It was not, then, in the house.

He recrossed the room and went to the window, pressing the stud that opened it fully. The noise increased in volume.

It was a high, fluctuating sort of scream. Not a living scream, but the kind rather that used to be made by the tortured vents of jet air-to-air vehicles. It was not pleasant, possibly because it was so vague and meaningless as well as being high-pitched.

The sound came from the sky; Stebbing felt sure of that. Though, peering up into the wide canopy of clear blue, he could see nothing. He wondered if it might be coming from a spaceship in trouble, one of the Mars Line boats, for instance. If so, it must be a weird kind of trouble, for

the sound had no relation to anything Stebbing had ever heard—and troubled spaceships had been a frequent accompaniment to his youth.

Stebbing shrugged and went back to his electrotyper. There was work to be done. There was meaning to be made of other seemingly meaningless things than strange sounds. And it had to be done while the symbolism was still clear in his mind, for he made no notes, did no paper work. Stebbing's discoveries happened in his head. Sometimes the electronic calculator checked them, or worked out specific examples, but the general principles, the framework, the pattern, was a function of the pathways in Stebbing's brain. They merely needed transference to paper some time before the pathways interlinked with newer concepts.

But the noise was persistently aggravating. Stebbing found himself hitting the wrong keys at intervals—a thing that hadn't happened

for years. The eraser mechanism on the typer took care of the mistakes, but they troubled him all the same. His mind began to work on three lines instead of one. The monograph, the sound, his mistakes.

He looked at the window periodically, then dragged his gaze back to the paper. The flextic chair seemed no longer so comfortable. And the sound grew louder and louder.

At length, it became impossible for Stebbing to continue his work. With a feeling of irritation, he rose again and once more went to the window.

The sound was now more a shriek than a scream. It oscillated maddeningly in the higher registers, setting up frightening resonances in the nervous system. Stebbing's mind, detached by long experience from his body, tried to analyse the sound and its significance.

The sound was something he had never heard before. That could simply mean that

he hadn't been around enough, but he doubted it. He believed that during his eighty-odd years of life he had experienced all the sounds of the solar system. In his youth he had written a thesis on the logical relations of sound and response, and that had necessitated a thorough classification.

So, if the sound were not occasioned by anything in the solar system, it must come from outside that system. The possibilities, then, were infinite.

The conclusion was rather surprising, though Stebbing's free mind was able to accept it without a quibble. The acceptance made it all the easier when observation confirmed his reasoning, as it did a few moments later.

Immediately below the library window a rough garden extended to the narrow private road. Beyond the hedge a wide flat field stretched away to the foot of some low hills. Visually, it was a scene of peace and serenity. Auditorily, it didn't add up. The

sound seemed more real than the landscape.

And then, it happened.

In a quick flash the scene changed. Where the field had presented a monotonous flat green table, it now held a glowing red dome and the crimson flames of burning grass. Soil that had lain for years beneath the grass was heaped up now in grey-black mounds, smoking in a most disquieting fashion.

The noise, Stebbing noted, had stopped. Or, rather, it had changed to a low hissing, menacingly sibilant. There was that, and the crackling flames and—screams.

The screams came from neighbours who were now fleeing across the nearby fields, away from the glowing dome. They struck Stebbing as being rather silly. For their flight there might be some justification, but there was no sense in screaming.

Stebbing was rather pleased to see that young Jim Flatterby, ten-year-old son of his left-

hand neighbour, was nonchalantly standing by a gap in the hedge and peering with mute wonder at the apparition. Then Mrs. Flatterby, followed closely by her philosopher husband, dragged the boy away and made off towards the distant woods.

The boy might make a logician in spite of his father, Stebbing decided, smiling. Old Ned Flatterby was a cheerful intellectual rival of Stebbing's, a man who believed that logic was not the secret of efficient living.

Stebbing Joseph brought his mind back to the present situation. The glowing dome, he had decided, was almost undoubtedly a spaceship from some stellar system. Beyond that he could not go. Certainly he could not see any argument for running away or screaming, since there was no evidence whatever that the ship bore enemies.

He heard the voice of young Jim Flatterby floating up from down the road near the woods. "Men from Magellan!

Gosh, I bet that's what they are!"

Stebbing smiled again. The youngster might be more right than he suspected—in the denotational sense, at least. Connotationally he was possibly wrong, for the cry "Men from Magellan" was merely the modern substitute for "Men from Mars" that used, mildly, to terrorise the ancients of the twentieth century. The Magellanic Clouds had taken the place of the red planet Mars as a home of monstrous invaders almost as soon as the latter planet was found to be without life.

No, Stebbing thought, there was no evidence that could justify fear. Neither, of course, was there anything that could really justify wonder. To him, the spaceship from the stars was an interesting phenomenon, but hardly wonderful, since it was obvious that the stars must have intelligent creatures among them. Here they were. So what? What was all the fuss about?

Then he saw the creatures

get out of the ship—and decided that here *was* just cause for wonder.

The visitors looked very human. They had two arms and two legs attached to a more or less cylindrical trunk, at the top of which was a head that would not have been noticed in a crowd. That was not surprising to Stebbing. It was reasonable to suppose that humanoid life would evolve more than once in the colossal universe. The fact that the visitors were unclothed was also unsurprising—modern terrestrial fashions were skimpy in the extreme, and nudism was no longer cranky behaviour, though it was normally restricted to informal occasions.

The thing about the visitors that excited Stebbing's wonder was that they walked on air.

At least, so it seemed, for the two men and one woman who stepped out of the glowing dome did so by soaring up into the air at the apex, no doubt to avoid the hot material of the dome, and then

"walked" down an invisible incline to within five feet of the ground. Stebbing could see that their feet were enclosed in rather heavy-looking boots, and deduced that these were some kind of anti-gravity machine. An anti-gravity machine was certainly cause for wonder.

Stebbing saw one of the male aliens descend slowly to ground level and test, as it were, the soil with the tip of one foot. The creature evidently found it suitable, for he proceeded to bring down his other foot. The other man and the woman sank down beside him.

Then the three of them began to cross the field, looking interestedly to either side but not deviating from a direction that led straight towards Stebbing's house. More screams came from the direction of the woods, and the aliens turned their heads towards the clump of dark conifers. They exchanged a few words but did not stop. Once, one of them turned

back to give a brief glance to the glowing dome, that was now much duller and obviously cooling. Then they all reached the hedge.

They rose up into the air, "walked" over the top of the hedge, and then descended on the other side. They crossed the road—and stopped, looking up towards Stebbing where he still stood by the window.

"May we come in?" one man said.

"Yes. Please do," said Stebbing.

The three aliens rose into the air and made their way towards Stebbing's library window.

STEBBING moved back into the room as the aliens sailed gently in between the open doors of the window. He stood with his back against a tall bookcase and watched with cool, intent brown eyes as the aliens dropped smoothly to the floor.

All three were quite naked except for the contraptions on

their feet, and they appeared to be carrying nothing. Their skin was white—or, rather, tanned, but obviously not inherently pigmented. Their bodies were splendidly proportioned, with muscles of just the right size rippling gently beneath the skin. They looked, Stebbing mused, like Grecian gods.

"I'm sorry I cannot ask you all to sit down," Stebbing said. "There is only one chair. Perhaps . . .?" He looked at the woman.

"Thank you," she said, and sat down, smiling.

As she crossed her legs, Stebbing could see that the soles of her feet were obscured by a thick metal sheet cut to the shape of her foot. The bottom of the metal was perfectly smooth.

"Our arrival seems to have startled some of your neighbours," one of the men said. "From the screams we heard, and the pictures that we saw on our screens, they appeared to be rather frightened."

Stebbing smiled. "Your

arrival has probably startled the whole world. You will soon see another manifestation of that fear. The Army will arrive shortly with weapons."

The man puckered his lips. "We expected something of the sort, but there was no other way." He remained silent for a moment, looking round the room. Then: "You do not seem to share their fear."

It was a question as well as a statement, Stebbing recognised. He answered it in the only way he could.

"As yet there is no evidence that the physical concomitants of fear are required for survival."

"And you do not immediately question us on our origin and intent."

Stebbing shrugged, looked at them each in turn. "As your host I wait for you to inform me when you wish. The explanations are not immediately important."

The man who had spoken looked at the other two aliens. They answered his glance with slight nods.

"What is immediately important?" asked the man.

"Nothing. Not to me. You have arrived. Until you do something or say something significant there is no basis for assessing importance."

"Good. We seem to have chosen the right man. Did you realise you had been chosen?"

Stebbing nodded. "I thought it probable, since you came straight to my house—which wasn't the nearest to your ship. Though you may have avoided the others because their inhabitants had run off."

"Yes." The man looked round the library again for a moment. "Can you think of anything that is important for *our* survival? Immediately important, I mean, of course."

"I don't know where your vulnerability lies," Stebbing answered. "Or even if you *are* vulnerable. But assuming that you resemble terrestrials in all vital features then you should, perhaps, make provision for an attack by the Army."

"What sort of an attack?"

"I imagine that they will first of all try to communicate with you and ask you to leave this house, go out into the open. If you refuse, they may open fire on this house. They will certainly try to investigate your ship. They might destroy its motive powers and that might threaten your survival. Thus it might be necessary for you to protect your ship and your persons against the weapons of the Army. You may know what kind of weapons?"

The alien smiled. "Yes, we know. Our ship is safe and so are we—I include you and your house in that."

Stebbing said nothing. He merely nodded and waited.

"Introductions," said the alien. "You are Stebbing Joseph and we all know a good deal about you. That is Margaret Deam, a sociologist. This is Graham Slade, an economist. I am Bruce Curtis, nexialist."

Stebbing nodded to each as they were named. They smiled

back at him, but said nothing.

"In a sense," Bruce Curtis said, "I am the leader of this party, though we each have full powers in our respective fields. We come from a planet that orbits a star we call Hisla in the constellation that you call Orion. Our purpose is to——"

He broke off as a loud roar, mingled with shouting, came from outside.

"The Army," said Stebbing.

The three aliens went to the window and Stebbing came up behind them. Looking over their bare shoulders he could see that the cooling ship was being ringed, at a respectable distance, with the ugly snouts of missile guns and the flaring nozzles of disintegrators. The nearest part of the ring was double, the inner rank weapons facing Stebbing's house and curving out around it on each side. The men manning the weapons were pale and nervous; that much was obvious even from the library window.

"They will use loudspeakers,

I think," said Stebbing quietly.

"I hope they don't shoot first."

"It will not matter," said Bruce Curtis, absently and calmly.

Stebbing looked at the back of the man's head and wondered what kind of powers these aliens possessed. And how they would use them.

Through the slit of a hurriedly-erected pillbox came the glint of light on binocular lenses, turned to rake the house. Then came a spluttering as a P.A. system warmed up.

"If you can understand us, come out of the house," blared the speaker. The message was repeated in several languages. "Come out of the house or we open fire!"

"Why do they assume that we must understand one or other of your terrestrial tongues?" Margaret Deam said, rhetorically.

Bruce Curtis leaned across the sill. "We have business here. We shall come out to you when we have finished. Please do not interfere with us.

We mean no harm to you. Be patient and we shall come among you."

His voice was strangely loud, and must have carried to the pillbox. But it seemed not to have the desired effect.

"Come out immediately or we open fire! You have ten seconds."

Stebbing, close behind Bruce Curtis, heard him sigh.

"Come on then," Bruce said.

The three aliens rose up and sailed through the window. Amusedly, Stebbing watched the open mouths form in the faces of the soldiers below. Then he became serious as the aliens dropped gently to the ground on the road and started to walk towards the pillbox.

"Halt!" yelled the speaker.

The aliens complied.

There was a deep silence. Stebbing could imagine the hurried conferences going on in the pillbox as the officers tried to decide on the best course of action. Then he caught his breath as he saw the wicked gleam of a missile

barrel jutting a little beyond the pillbox slit. The aliens were not watching; their heads were turned, surveying the armed might that was lined up against them on all sides.

The missile gun shifted a little and came to point at Graham Slade. It spurted fire, and immediately afterwards came the sharp crackle of the explosion.

The heads of the aliens swung round. They could see the barrel. Maybe they could smell the odour of the explosion. They looked at the ground a little in front of Graham Slade, then they raised their heads and stared at the pillbox.

The pillbox—disappeared.

For a moment nothing happened. The disappearance was so incredibly without light or beam or flash accompaniment that it took a second or so to be believed. Then the soldiers lost their nerve.

To Stebbing, up at the window with a grandstand view of the field, it seemed as though every gun and dis-

integrator there had opened up. The entire ring of weapons around the ship gushed flame and roared with explosions. The noise was ear-splitting in intensity. The flashes were almost blinding. And above it all came a hoarse, terrified shouting from the frenzied soldiers.

But the aliens did not move, except for their heads.

Standing at the focal point of all that destructive force, they appeared quite unharmed. They swivelled their heads away from each other, as though each were taking an arc of the circled weapons for closer examination.

And one by one the weapons disappeared, together with their crews. In an unbelievably short time there was not a weapon visible—even, Stebbing was interested to notice, on the side of the dome opposite the aliens.

With the disappearance of the last weapon came silence. Even the screams had died away. The people in the woods, who must have seen

the whole unequal engagement, must have been too scared even to scream.

Slowly, calmly, the aliens turned, rose and headed towards the library window.

"WE DIDN'T like having to do that," Bruce said, when the aliens were all back in Stebbing's library. "But I think you will agree that it was necessary?"

Stebbing glanced at Graham Slade, who had not a mark on him. "Well, I'm not sure. It seemed as though they couldn't hurt you. Did you have to kill them?"

Bruce Curtis gave a short laugh. "I forgot that we hadn't explained. They are not dead. They are in a state of suspended animation in another plane of vibration. They can be brought back, alive and well."

"I see. That is different," Stebbing conceded. "Some time I should like you to explain how it is done—and how you protected yourselves from the weapons. Meantime, you

should know that they will send reinforcements, with more powerful weapons. Also, there will probably be a large-scale panic on. It would be nice if you could do something to cancel that."

"By the time reinforcements arrive," Bruce said, "we shall be gone from here. Where we are going we will allay the panic—at least for a time. Margaret here will stay with you to fill in the details. I shall give you an outline of our purpose now. It is, in a way, fiction come to life, a theme dealt with in many of your planetmen's more imaginative novels."

He paused and looked at the bookshelves, where some of the better imaginative novels stood cheek-by-jowl with tomes of philosophy. Then he turned back to Stebbing.

"Among the stars we have a culture, a great culture. As the years go by, more and more planets become members of that culture. The parent body, my own planet, maintains a constant observation on every

intelligent-life planet in the galaxy. From time to time, as now, we send a party to a planet that we think might be ripe for admission to the culture. Sometimes the planet has to be modified. That is the case with Earth. As Earth is, it could not be admitted. But we believe that Earth *could* become admissible."

He broke off, as though giving Stebbing a chance to say something.

"And if the modification does not occur? Or if the planet decides that it does not want to join your culture?"

Bruce Curtis waited a moment, then: "In each case—death to the planet. Once a technological race such as yours discovers that there is a culture among the stars, it would be only a matter of time before stellar ships were built—your astronauts are working on the problem even now, and have been for centuries, *without* the knowledge that a culture exists. With that knowledge, the incentive is so much greater. As for your

second case, the galaxy is, relatively speaking, small. There is no room in it for divergent planets, divergent cultures. When the level of civilisation reaches the point where inclusion in the great culture is possible, the planet must join or die."

Stebbing thought for a while. It was a difficult problem. One which, on a minor, smaller scale, had been posed on Earth centuries before. It had been decided then that world-wide peace was possible only under a world-wide culture. Years of hard, insistent work had gone into the making of the one culture, the blending of parts of the old into a new contented Phœnix. Men had died and taken their ideas with them. Men had been killed and their ideas had been buried with them in one deep, long grave. And cultures had died, wiped out of existence; whole ways of living had ceased to be. For the good of the whole.

It had not been a pleasant

solution. But it had been the only solution possible.

Stebbing sighed and looked at Bruce Curtis. "It seems rational," he said. "For the good of the galaxy."

He looked at Graham Slade and the alien nodded solemnly. He looked at Margaret Deam and she smiled at him.

"So Earth must be modified," he said. "We must learn to fit your culture. Or we die. And my role? The role for which you have chosen me?"

Bruce Curtis gazed at him levelly. "You are to effect the modification."

"And that is?"

"For you to decide. We are placing you in supreme command of Earth. Your will shall be law. On the results you obtain will depend the fate of your planet."

STEBBING JOSEPH was having a quiet talk with Margaret Deam when the first hint of opposition came, and a broad hint at that.

The two male aliens had departed for a destination

they didn't mention, leaving the woman to fill in the details and help Stebbing as much as she could. Which was not much. She had already told him that she could give him no hint whatever about what to do, what course of action to take. The modification of the Earth to fit the specification of the stellar culture was entirely Stebbing's affair.

He had been chosen by the aliens as being, in their estimation, the most intelligent man on Earth. If he could not effect the desired change, making the people of the world see the necessity for his decrees, then in their estimation no one could. And that would be the end of Earth and everybody on it.

Stebbing was mulling over the problem, trying to obtain an idea of the essential features of the stellar culture—and finding it difficult to extract any information at all—when the door of the library crashed open.

Afterwards, Stebbing had to

admit that the military had planned it efficiently. For the present he was simply swept off his feet, literally.

As the door swung wide, two army staff officers dashed into the room and grabbed Stebbing. In a hasty glance he could see that two more were seizing Margaret Deam. Then he was dragged through the door, across the landing and down the staircase in double quick time. Outside the house he was shoved impolitely into an army car that shot forward on the instant.

Twisting his head and looking through the rear window, he could see that another army car was standing outside the house. But there was no sign of Margaret Deam or her captors.

He faced front and stared at the army officers who sat on either side of him—with drawn pistols. He glanced at the guns.

"Is that really necessary?" he asked, calmly. "I'm not really dangerous, you know."

The officers ignored him. Stebbing turned away and

watched the road ahead. The car was moving at an incredible speed. Stebbing saw a control post flash by. Through the rear window he saw soldiers trundling a heavy obstacle across the road. The military, it seemed, had taken command.

A few moments later the car stopped. Stebbing was dragged out, pulled across the road and crammed into the tiny cabin of a jeticopter, which immediately rose from the ground and headed north.

Stebbing did not need to ask where he was being taken. He knew. The War Office.

GENERAL MELSON was fat, and red, and worried. He sat at his desk and glared at his subordinates. The subordinates quaked.

"So they got away," said the general, and his tone was as placid as a lake in summer. His subordinates were not fooled. One went by the general's appearance, not his tone.

"We did our best..." began a trembling colonel.

"I'm sure you did," the general cut in. "But it wasn't quite good enough, was it?"

"They seem to have powers..." started a young, agitated major.

The general's voice now lost its placidity and took on the features of thunder. "Powers! Powers? And haven't *we* got powers, you blockheads! Didn't I authorise the use of the most stringent methods? Didn't I order that these—these creatures should be arrested at any cost, even if we had to kill them in the process? *Didn't I?*"

"Yes, general," said the colonel.

"Yes, general," said the major.

The general relaxed a little, partly out of pity for his arteries and partly because he got no pleasure from slating subordinates. His only pleasure came from duty well discharged.

He stared morosely at the

reports on his desk. "All I'm waiting for now is word to come that the Joseph fellow and the woman have got away. That would be a fitting climax to the day's events!"

The colonel took the opportunity of explaining how well the general's other orders had been carried out. The evacuation of the area for a hundred square miles around the spaceship had been completed. A heavy force had been stationed around the perimeter and all roads were effectively blocked. Messages had been broadcast all over the world, telling people not to panic—and they seemed to be having the desired effect.

"Any casualties?" the general asked, abruptly. "Civilians, I mean."

"A few suicides, I think, sir," the major put in. "Nothing much."

The general eyed him. "Nothing much? Good, ordinary, decent folk kill themselves because the military is too damned inefficient to bag

a couple of aliens, and you say it's nothing much!"

"I'm sorry, general," said the major.

"You will be, my boy, you will be," the general murmured.

"Your personal plane is ready for instant take-off, general," said the colonel.

The general stared at the colonel. "What has that got to do with it?"

The colonel looked uncomfortable. "I—I just thought you'd like to know, sir."

Any comment the general may have had in mind was forestalled by the door swinging open. A lieutenant with an excited face poked his head through the opening.

"He's here, sir!"

"God almighty!" the general exploded. Then in a soft voice that gradually rose to a crescendo he said: "Could you, as a personal favour, *tell me WHO IS HERE?*"

The lieutenant's face dropped. "Yes, sir, certainly, sir, Joseph, sir."

"Joseph!" The general stood

up, face eager, hands pressed hard on the desk top. "Bring him in, then, bring him in!"

The general sat down as the lieutenant disappeared. "At least we've got *one* of them," he said, with satisfaction.

They pushed Joseph into the room without any introduction. He did not need one. He knew that he was facing General Melson, Supreme Chief of Military Affairs.

"Sit down, Joseph, sit down," said the general.

"Thank you, general." Stebbing sat.

The general leaned on his desk and looked at Stebbing squarely. "Look, Joseph, this is a time for straight talk. I'm sorry if you've been handled in a manner unfitting to a gentleman, but you will perhaps agree that the situation is critical."

"I don't see why," said Stebbing.

"You don't?" said the general, and his voice held a deceptively casual tone of enquiry. "Aliens have landed on Earth. Two of them, at

least, are loose among the population. A couple of dozen first-class weapons and a hundred or two men have just disappeared. The civilian population is panicking. Many are committing suicide. But you don't see why the situation is critical!"

Stebbing returned the general's belligerent stare with an even gaze. "You are enumerating a number of facts, some of them inexplicable, the others analysable in terms of human irrationality. You have mentioned nothing that could connote a critical situation."

The general let out a long breath. "Of course," he said. "Now I remember. You're a logician, aren't you?"

Stebbing did not answer. The general did not give him much chance.

"All right. We won't argue over a silly little thing like world panic, will we? You just tell me everything you know about these aliens. Will you do that?"

"Certainly," said Stebbing, and he gave an account of all

that had happened in his library up to the time of his arrest. He told the story simply and objectively, ignoring the general's heightening colour as he expounded the aliens' terms for Earth's continued existence.

To give him his due, the general heard Stebbing out and did not speak until he had finished. Then:

"Nelson's blood! What arrogance! To come here and demand that we join some fiddling little secret society of theirs—and threatening to wipe us out if we don't! Saying that we don't quite fit the bill and demanding that we change—giving *you* the job of changing us! Of all the confounded nerve!"

The general had been pacing the room. He stopped on his last sentence and glared at Stebbing.

"Mine or theirs?" Stebbing asked, quietly.

The general blinked, as though the question had hit him between the eyes. "Yours or theirs *what*?" he said.

"My confounded nerve or their confounded nerve?" said Stebbing

General Melson flung himself down in his desk chair. "Now look here, Joseph, you're an intelligent man, a bit of a logician, well up in philosophy and all that stuff. What's your opinion?"

"About what?" asked Stebbing.

The general was on his feet again, thumping the desk. "The aliens, man, the aliens! What else?" He sank back and made a visible effort to be calm. With a swift wave of his hand he dismissed the two subordinates who had been standing, quietly anxious, in the background. "Now, Joseph," he said. "All this talk of your taking over the world is so much poppycock, as you must be well aware. Absolute rot. But what are we going to do? As an intelligent man who has had personal contact with these creatures, I ask you what is your opinion?"

"I'm afraid I must disagree with you," Stebbing replied.

"This business of my taking over the world is *not* poppycock. That is the way it is going to be. And my opinion is that you and everybody else must accept the fact—and cease to look upon these superior intelligences as some queer sort of animals."

Once again the general heard him out. And this time, when Stebbing had finished, the general did not explode. Instead, he narrowed his eyes and leaned forward, giving a most frightening appearance that was completely lost on Stebbing.

"Now look here, Joseph, don't go getting any ideas about being the ruler of the world. Don't run away with the idea that you are going to have supreme power. Because you are *not*! And if that's the way you react to the invasion of your planet by alien monsters, I shall clap you in the deepest jail we've got. I shall——"

"No you won't," said a voice from the door.

The general looked up and

Stebbing swung round. In the open doorway stood Margaret Deam.

"Oh!" exclaimed the general. "Who are you?"

"One of the savage monsters," Stebbing could not resist saying.

The general, realising that he actually had an alien on the premises, was frenziedly pressing buttons on his desk. With him, first things came first.

"Do come in and sit down," he said, when he had finished with the buttons and regained a modicum of calm. "I'd like to talk to you."

Margaret Deam came in and closed the door. She crossed the room and sat beside Stebbing.

"I should warn you," Stebbing said, "that the general has probably sent out an alarm. All doors will be sealed and guards will appear at any moment."

The general sent him a blistering look, as though trying to blast him for treasonable behaviour.

"No they won't," said Margaret Deam. "I took care of that."

"How did you get away from those soldiers back in my library?" Stebbing asked.

Before she could answer, the general broke in. "Do you mind if I handle this situation?" he demanded, obviously with great restraint, throwing a quick glance at the door. "Young lady, I hear some remarkable things about you and your friends. I hope, now that you have found someone in authority, all these misunderstandings can be settled once and for all."

Stebbing smiled a little at the general's naive approach, but he did not interfere. He believed that Margaret Deam was quite capable of dealing with the Supreme Chief of Military Affairs.

"I can understand what you mean about the person in authority, but I don't follow about misunderstandings. I thought Stebbing Joseph quite understood the situation."

The general glanced at the door and then back to Margaret Deam. "You really do misunderstand, Miss. I am the person in authority, not Joseph!"

Margaret Deam laughed. It was a very pleasant sound, and Stebbing found himself listening to it with great care. But it came to an end and turned into a little low tinkling rumble as Margaret Deam beamed amusedly at the general.

General Melson was shifting irritably in his chair and sending rapid glances at the door and at Margaret Deam.

"Look here, young lady," he said at last. "Just *what* have you done to the guards?"

"Transvibratised them," the woman answered.

"And what the hell does that mean?" the general demanded, crossly.

"Done any higher physics?" the woman asked, pleasantly.

The general glared at her. "Did a bit at the academy, of course. Long time ago. But I don't want a lecture. I want action!"



Illustrated by Davis

"How about this?" Margaret Deam said, and Stebbing and herself disappeared before the general's startled and disbelieving eyes.

A moment later, he was frantically pushing buttons again.

"THAT WAS QUITE a pleasant interlude," said Margaret Deam, "but I think this is a time to be serious. After all, the situation facing your world is not comic, is it?"

"General Melson thought it was critical," said Stebbing, with a smile.

They were back in his library. How they had got there, Stebbing could not have told. One moment he had been watching the general's florid face grow redder in the searchlight of Margaret's mirth. The next moment he had been in some queer no-man's land of existence, where everything about him was vague and meaningless and motionless. Even thought had seemed to be petrified. And then, just as suddenly, a

miraculous transition had set him down in the library, with Margaret Deam at his side.

She had behaved quite casually, as though such teleportations, if that was what they were, often happened to her. As probably they did.

And she had refused to explain the nature of the transition, except that it was similar to "transvibratisation." This latter was the process by which the men and weapons had been made to disappear, and by which, Margaret said, she had been able to leave her captors on reaching the War Office and march into the general's room.

"In a sense it may be critical," Margaret Deam replied. She smiled. "Though perhaps you think that your task is simple?"

Stebbing shook his head, and looked a little glum. "I am very much aware of the difficulties. People aren't going to like this arrangement at all."

"Your being in command?"

Perhaps one of your tasks is to make them like it."

Stebbing thought she was giving him an oblique hint, and was grateful to her for it. He only wished that she were able to help him more. He was pretty certain that she and, probably, all her people, would find very little to tax their intelligence in modifying Earth. No, that was wrong. It was not his only wish. He wished his intelligence were as great as theirs.

But wishing does not make things so.

"Bruce Curtis and Graham Slade are out among your people," Margaret Deam went on. "They will not be discovered, of course, and they will be able to observe the changes you make. Naturally, they already have a complete knowledge of what Earth is today. They may see you from time to time and give you progress reports, just to let you know how far you have succeeded."

"And you?" Stebbing said.

"I stay with you all the time. To help and to protect."

Stebbing was conscious of a most illogical feeling of pleasure at the news. It would be nice having Margaret Deam with him.

The buzzer of the visiphone murmured, bee-like, in the corner. Stebbing crossed to it and switched on the incoming call. The screen cleared and became alive with the still-florid face of General Melson.

"Ah, I thought you might be there," the general said, before Stebbing had a chance to speak. "Now look here, Joseph, we know when we're beaten. It may sound funny to you, but it's an important part of military science—it *is* a science, you know. Don't go on fighting once you are beaten. Axiom. So we give in, surrender, sheath our swords and all that stuff. Tell us what you want and we'll do it."

Stebbing smiled at the general's look of goodwill-under-protest. "And the conditions?"

"Absolutely unconditional. Completely. Of course, you'd oblige us no end and make things a lot easier for the women at night if you could tell us where those two aliens are."

"That I do not know," Stebbing replied.

"Oh, well, maybe you'll find out sometime. Let me know when you do, eh? Good. All right, old boy, what can I do for you? You know I can get you anything you want."

"I wish you could," said Stebbing.

"What's that?" the general queried.

"Never mind. I'm not sure at the moment what I want. I'll work out a plan and then let you know."

"Fine, fine. Then maybe we can talk it over. See if I could help. Two heads better than one, you know. Any time, any time at all."

"Thank you, general," said Stebbing, and switched off.

Margaret Deam was smiling when he turned to her. "Seems

the authorities have bowed to the inevitable."

"Could be. It was true what the general said about military strategy, of course. But he left a bit out."

"So you noticed that?" Margaret said, quietly.

Stebbing glanced at her. "Yes. The axiom runs as the general said, and then there's a bit more. Don't go on fighting once you are beaten—*you are expending forces that are useful in a come-back!* We must watch the general very carefully, I think."

"No one else?" Margaret asked.

Stebbing stared at her. "Everyone else. Every-single-individual-one else."

"But you'll manage?"

Stebbing switched his gaze to the window. "I wonder," he said. "I wonder."

"DOES THAT really mean that we are quitting, sir?" asked the pale young captain.

General Melson turned away from the visiphone. He treated the captain to a gaze

of withering scorn. "Ever known me to quit, Captain Cudlipp?"

"No, sir, but you just told Joseph that——"

The general cut in. "I know what I told him. And what else was there to say? It's about fifteen minutes since Joseph and that female creature disappeared in front of my eyes. Nobody saw them go from here. I buzzed the troops around the spaceship and nobody saw them go into Joseph's house. Yet when I ring, there they are. Joseph isn't the only logician in the world, you know. So they've got powers that we can't understand——"

"That's what I——"

"Don't interrupt!" thundered the general. "And if we can't understand them we can't fight them. Not yet. So we play along with them until we do understand. Then, by Nelson's blood, we'll knock them right back to the stars they've come from!"

"But if Joseph has a free

hand," put in the major, "there's going to be chaos."

The general considered for a moment. "Maybe not chaos. Joseph's not a fool, you know. I wish he were. Fools are easier to deal with. He'll do his work as quietly as possible, I don't doubt. There'll be confusion here and there. Economy knocked to blazes and all that, but nothing we can't handle in the long run."

"Let's hope it's not too long," said the captain.

The general eyed him. "Aye," he said, sincerely, "let's hope it's not too long."

The captain beamed.

"Did those orders go out?" the general asked, looking at the major.

"Yes, sir. On all wavelengths. Everyone's been told to do what Joseph says. The entire position has been put clearly to the public and they've been asked to co-operate—and to inform us of all Joseph's demands. That should take care of the present situation."

"You talk as though you

thought it up yourself," said the general.

"Well, I did make some suggest——"

"Yes, yes, all right. Now you two clear off and let me think. When the reports come in, boil them down to essentials. I just want to know what lines Joseph's working on."

When his subordinates had gone, General Melson waited a moment and then crossed to the visiphone. He dialled the number of a very peculiar, very secret organisation. When the screen cleared no face showed. Even General Melson did not know who ran the secret service. On the screen was a symbol that told the general he had made contact on the right beam.

"I want Stebbing Joseph followed," he said, quietly. "Not interfered with. Just followed. And his movements reported hourly."

The screen stayed symbolic for a second or two and then fuzzed into the green-grey

swirl of a broken connection. General Melson switched off.

He had no idea whether his instructions would be carried out. The secret service was entirely autocratic. Besides, it might have too many commitments. He could only hope that they would do what he asked.

General Melson went back to his chair, slumped his shoulders and stared at the top of his desk. He was seeing nothing, thinking a lot.

THE MOUTHPIECE of the vox-typer made a dull plop as Stebbing Joseph dropped it back into its holder. He gathered up the sheets of paper that had spilled from the machine, divided them into six sections and signed the last sheet of each pile. The papers represented three hours of solid dictation. The treatise on symbolic logic was still at the stage where he had left it when the strange sound occurred.

Stebbing stood up. "Right,"

he said to Margaret Deam, who had been quietly reading some of his books. "We'll go and call on the Road Controller."

"Good," she said, and followed him from the room.

They passed through the house—filled with old books that had overspilled from the library—and went outside. The sun had long since passed beyond the horizon, but the artificial orbs spaced high up in the sky made a good imitation of natural daylight.

"I have a car," Stebbing said. "We'll use that."

He led the way to the garage. The doors opened as he approached and revealed a sleek, modern vehicle. Stebbing climbed into the driving seat, leaving Margaret Deam to take her place beside him. He started the engine and threw the piles of paper onto Margaret's lap.

"Put those in the back for me, will you?" he said.

The woman leaned across the back of her seat and

tossed the papers into the rear as the car began to move off.

"There's a mouse back there," she said.

Stebbing turned the car into the road. "We get them in the country, you know. Don't mind them, do you?"

"Not at all. They're rather sweet."

"Unless they get into the food store," Stebbing laughed. He stepped on the accelerator.

In the back, the mouse sat on its haunches and twitched its vibrissæ, its hard black eyes staring straight ahead. And under the sleek grey fur tiny wheels clicked motivation and an oscillator sent out messages picked up from the eyes and ears . . .

The car sped along the road, approached the military barrier.

"Hope they let us through," Stebbing said.

"They will."

And they did. As the car drew near, soldiers rolled back the heavy barrier. They stared into the car as it passed,

straining for a glimpse of the fabulous female alien.

Stebbing let the engine soar and the car streaked along between the close-set hedges of the private road. He slowed down sharply and swung the vehicle out onto the main highway. A few thousand yards along, he entered a take-off zone, where the view on either side was unobscured.

He pressed a button on the dash, and thin, remarkably efficient wings slid from slots in the side of the vehicle. The speed increased as Stebbing cut in the air jets. A moment later the car lifted itself gently from the road surface and the wheels folded smoothly inwards, leaving the belly sleek and streamlined.

Stebbing took the car up high and turned away from the direction of the road. "Ready for acceleration?" he asked.

"When you like," Margaret answered.

He rammed down the accelerator and the jets screamed

in agony or exhilaration, depending on whether you were a materialist or a man of mind. Stebbing winced a little under the sound.

The ground became a blur. Only the instruments on the dashboard could tell them where they were going.

In a matter of minutes a buzz sounded on the dash. Stebbing cut the jets and activated the forward tubes. The vehicle slowed abruptly. In the distance rose the cluttered outline of the capital. Stebbing switched on the radio.

"Joseph calling capital. I'm visiting the Road Controller. Over."

The radio spluttered. "Come in, Joseph. Take the shortest route. All other vehicles rise to fifteen thousand feet, immediately. Over."

"Over and out," said Stebbing, with a smile.

"Seems the general's been giving orders," Margaret Deam said, noticing Stebbing's smile.

Stebbing nodded but said nothing. He was watching the other vehicles rising out of his path. Even as he watched two collided and fell with a blazing crash on some part of the crowded capital. Stebbing's lips thinned.

He took the car in over the city and let it glide gently down to the ground, the wheels opening out to meet the roadway. The glide brought him in near the Road Control building, but it still took several minutes for him to wind his way through the milling traffic. Robot road overseers were wasting their time. They tried to keep the landing plots free by keeping external traffic on the move. But only the air control order had ensured that there would be no other vehicle on the plots when Stebbing came in to land.

Stebbing swung the car into the driveway of the Road Control building. He and Margaret got out and made their way to the controller's office—their path smoothed

by advance information given by air control.

The Road Controller showed them into seats immediately and then sat at his desk with an expression of polite enquiry, though it was easy to see that the man was highly puzzled. No doubt he could not see why the man in charge of Earth should first come to him.

Stebbing gazed at the man's fat body, puffy face and lethargic actions. Soft living from a sinecure, it seemed.

The logician threw one of the piles of paper onto the controller's desk. "This is the new law concerning road regulations," he said.

The controller blinked. "Really, I don't understand. You mean you want me to propose this in parliament, or something?"

"Parliament doesn't come in on this," Stebbing said. "Every year millions of people are killed and maimed on the roads. You know by now what my task is—to modify Earth to fit a star culture. The most

important change necessary is to protect human life in every possible way. Life, then health, then other things. This is the new law of the road. From now on you are really going to *control*!"

The controller blinked again, shifted in his chair, and began to read the papers. Stebbing remained silent while he did so. A faint buzzing caught his ear. He looked up and saw a housefly erratically darting about. Stebbing thought it strange. Houseflies were rare in the cities.

The controller gasped and looked up. "You want to imprison everyone who doesn't memorise the Highway Code? But that would paralyse the world! There must be millions who have never even read it!"

"That," said Stebbing, "is what I am getting at."

The controller turned back to the papers, and the fly continued its futile wanderings.

The controller exploded when he came to the last sheet.

"This is going to send civilisation toppling!" he said. "You can't do it, Joseph, really you can't. The whole economic machine is geared to transport as it now stands. You can't revolutionise the system like this!"

"Do you think it will cut down road deaths?" Stebbing asked.

"No doubt of it," the controller admitted. "But it'll put up the suicide rate."

"Not so high, though, I don't suppose," Stebbing said calmly. "Well, there it is. It goes into operation from midnight."

The controller tried a last brave shot. "Look, why not have some talks with the transport experts? They'll tell you where this is all wrong, and then you can all get down to working out a——"

"From midnight," said Stebbing. "Goodbye."

As they went through the door, the Road Controller stared after them—and the housefly came to rest on a window pane, its eyes blind, its oscillator silent. . . .

THE HEALTH CONTROLLER was asleep when Stebbing and Margaret arrived. They were shown into his office by a clerk, and a few minutes later the controller came panting into the room, still lightly clad for sleep.

"Sorry," he puffed. "Didn't know you were coming. Otherwise . . . you know. What can I do for you, Joseph? I guessed you'd be here sometime."

"Why?" Stebbing asked.

The Health Controller spread out long, thin hands. "Well, I mean to say. This is the most important organisation in society, the way I see it. Got to keep the people on their feet, and all that. Otherwise . . . you know."

"And you manage to do that?" Stebbing said.

The controller eyed him keenly. "You think we don't? Look here, I hope you haven't come here to criticise my department, Joseph. We've done some pretty good work, you know, one way and another. If you've come to

help, that's fine, but I shan't be very amenable to criticism, I can tell you."

Stebbing tossed a pile of papers onto the man's desk. "Here's how I'm going to help. It's the new Health Act. Comes into force at midnight."

The controller looked as though he might be going to make some warm comments, but he stifled whatever was struggling inside him and glared at the papers. Stebbing waited.

A jerky fluttering caught Stebbing's eye. A moth was exploring the air around the desk. Stebbing frowned. Houseflies and moths. Something must be wrong with the system of sanitation. At the Road Control *and* here? Stebbing stared at the moth, which had alighted on the controller's desk and was walking rapidly as though with determination towards one edge.

On impulse Stebbing leaned across and brought his hand down hard on the creature.

The controller uttered an

oath and jumped. "What on Earth are you doing?" he exclaimed.

"Killing a moth," said Stebbing.

"Moth? Moth?" said the controller, stupidly. Then he must have decided to give it up. "This is monstrous," he said, thumping the papers. "Close down drug research. Outlaw all patent medicines. Shut the maternity hospitals. This is crazy! Absolutely the most crackpot idea I've come across! You must be insane, Joseph."

"You haven't mentioned the positive aspects of the new Act," said Stebbing, mildly. "Health is to be approached purely from the preventive side. The sanitary regulations are altered and you have new strong powers of enforcing them, thus ensuring healthy living conditions."

"Yes, but even that's crazy," the controller expostulated. "These sanitary regulations are far too wide in application. Nothing to be printed in less

than twelve point characters. All cosmetics and soaps to be banned. Sale or manufacture of toothpaste prohibited. Why, this is going to plunge the world into unemployment as well as ruining several large industrial concerns. You can't do it, man!"

"It might make the people healthier, don't you think?" Stebbing smiled. "Help their eyes to stay sighted. Keep their skins clean. Save their teeth for a few more years. Things like that."

The controller simply looked shocked. "And this business of three months in every year at a different job—that will paralyse industry. And what's it *for*?"

"Stop ulcers," Stebbing said, shortly. "Anyway, there it is. From midnight tonight."

"Don't be ridiculous," exclaimed the controller. "I'm not going to implement this! It'd plunge the world into savagery!"

Stebbing looked at Margaret. She nodded and began

to stare at the controller. He immediately began to sweat and his face became contorted with pain. He clasped the edge of his desk and gasped.

"What—what are you doing?" he coughed. "You—you're killing me!"

"Only slowly, though," said Stebbing. "From midnight, Controller?"

The man suddenly jerked his hands away from the desk. Large blisters were forming where they had touched the metal, which was now glowing with heat.

The controller clasped his wounded fingers under his arms and glared at Stebbing, his face still distorted with the agony he was experiencing. He stayed silent a moment, clenching his teeth.

"All right," he said at last. "All right, Joseph. I'll do it. Is this the way you hope to save the world? This—this savagery?"

"It's logical," said Stebbing, and turned to go.

As they went through the

door another moth was fluttering just above it. Stebbing gave it a wide smile.

Outside, in the corridor, he laid a hand on Margaret's arm. She stopped and looked at him. He held out one hand—the one that had swiped the first moth.

Instead of the bright golden death rubble of a moth, on Stebbing's hand was a tiny mass of smashed electronic gear . . .

THE NEXT VISIT was to the Commerce Controller. He, too, was resting when Stebbing called—in these modern days there was no night and day for executives; they took their rest when they thought they needed it. They all lived on the job, as it were, and were available at all times. It gave them the appearance of being conscientious.

This one walked sedately into his office a few moments after Stebbing and Margaret Deam got there. He was dressed in the outmoded fashions of his calling—un-

comfortable striped trousers, tight black jacket, throttling stiff collar. He looked vulgarly overdressed. His face and manner bore traces of self-proclaimed martyrdom—in the cause of commerce.

"Glad to see you, Joseph," he said. "Thought you'd be along here some time. Stands to reason you'll need the help of the only ordered system in society."

"Does it occur to you that *you* might need help?" asked Stebbing.

"Oh, come now," answered the controller, radiating the smugness of the commercial tycoon. "Everything runs like clockwork. We've got a perfect system."

"Runs a little slowly, though," Stebbing responded, throwing a pile of papers onto the desk. "Here's something to speed it up a bit. A new Industrial Regulations Act."

The Commerce Controller looked surprised. "A new one? Parliament rushed it through quickly, didn't they? *I* didn't hear anything about it."

"This has nothing to do with Parliament," Stebbing explained. "Nothing has anything to do with Parliament any more. There's a world state of emergency, you know."

The Commerce Controller looked shocked. "But you can't do this! It's—it's unconstitutional! You'll cause chaos, man. I know we've all been told to do what you say, and I'm quite prepared to listen and to work by the majority vote, but the thing's got to be done properly, you know. I mean, we've got to keep to the system, the pattern, the organisation, haven't we?"

"No," said Stebbing. "You know quite well that every member of parliament is a businessman or has business contacts of a financial nature. Directors, chairmen, trustees. Their decisions are—understandably, I suppose—biased. I have only one axe to grind—the continued existence of Earth."

"But—but——" the Commerce Controller began.

"Would you take a look at the new Act, please?" Stebbing asked, politely.

The controller picked up the papers, looked from them to Stebbing and back again several times, and then began to read.

Stebbing peered interestedly about the room, as though searching for something. He found it and drew Margaret's attention to it.

In one corner near the ceiling, a spider was leisurely spinning a web.

The controller threw the papers down and glared at Stebbing. "This is chaotic!" he exclaimed redly. "Cut out all time work and pay only on results. Close down offices for three days a week. Go over to a system of material exchange, dispensing with money and bills of exchange. Close down the stock markets. Good Lord, man, do you realise what this would do?" The controller looked apoplectic.

Stebbing smiled. "Yes. It will ensure maximum efficiency

among workers—nearly half of their day is wasted in malingering, at the moment. It will dispense with the marginal trading that's based on credit notes and other pieces of paper. It will destroy the artificial value that has been attached to money and tokens. And it will prevent manipulation of consumer-goods production by men who own and make nothing but money."

The Commerce Controller seemed to boggle at the thought. "But—think of all the investors!"

"I am," said Stebbing. "Very hard."

"All their savings are tied up in bonds and stocks and shares. You can't just take all that away from them."

Stebbing sighed. "The Act makes provisions for the transfer of investors' paper wealth into material goods. The law is not designed to relieve them of their property, but merely to prevent their using vested paper interests as a control of production and price main-

tenance. Private enterprise and the incentive to accumulate material possessions is left untouched. I am merely ensuring that these activities are applied to things of real value. Once the investors have chosen the material equivalent of their investments, they may use that material equivalent in the new system of barter."

The Commerce Controller persisted. "Think of the transport problems, man! How are we going to effect the shifting of all these goods? Transport is a major industrial problem already."

"Has been for years," Stebbing said laconically. "And getting worse all the time—because transportation facilities were not based on a system of real values. The Road Controller now has a new charter which, like the Industrial Act, goes into operation at midnight. Your transport problems have been solved—unfortunately for those who have holdings in the business."

The controller said: "You're

going to get opposition, you know. People aren't going to take this on the chin—as you seem to think they will. Even the full force of the military won't be able to prevent a revolution." The controller leaned forward, and, in a sudden burst of confidence, said: "You may think that you are going to run this world, Joseph, but believe me you're not. This world has always been run by the small handful of men who have the money. Silly stories about annihilation by star beasts are not going to scare them into losing everything they have ever lived for. They are going to fight you, and they will win!"

Stebbing stood up, tiredly. "If they do, the world will lose," he said. "But that remains to be seen. Put this new Act into force at midnight. By the way, you've got a spider in the room." He nodded to the web in the corner.

The controller was still looking up there with a

puzzled expression when Stebbing and Margaret left.

"ALL RIGHT," said the general, pushing the reports aside. "It's going to need some careful planning and even more careful execution, but I think we can handle it. Agreed?"

He looked enquiringly at the major and the captain. They nodded eagerly. General Melson grunted.

"Wonder if you really do . . . Anyway, it seems pretty obvious what those other two aliens are doing. They're out among the populace as observers. They're watching to see that Joseph really does get the job done. Until we can lash out at them and win, we must let it appear that our clever logician is succeeding."

"Only appear?" said the major.

"Yes." The general eyed the reports. "I was wrong about Joseph. He *is* a bit of a fool. All this stuff would cause chaos. We can't let that happen. We've got to remain organised for the big job

when it comes. So we let it look as though we're playing along with him, but take careful precautions against his schemes being put into effect."

The captain stirred. "Is that going to be possible, sir?"

"We've got to make it possible!" the general said, loudly. "Everything depends on it. Anyway, I've been in touch with the Road Controller and we've worked out a few schemes. For instance, this business about the Highway Code—the police will handle that. They'll pull in people from the streets and examine them on the Code—I may say that the standard of passes will be extremely low. Just to put up something of a front, we are dragging all convicts along to the examinations, failing them and slinging them back into prison—with appropriate notices in the Press about their numbers. That should fool the aliens, eh?"

"And people on other charges, who would have been

sent to prison anyway, can be sent for not knowing the Code," said the major, brightly.

"Good idea," the general responded. "Try to get some more. Then there's this business of imprisonment for jay-walking. We've got that taped too. We're going to fix up for——"

He broke off as an orderly came into the office and placed a single sheet of paper on the general's desk. General Melson leaned down and read it, then looked up with a grim, ugly twist to his lips.

"Joseph's ordered that all convicts be taken out of prison and put to work in certain designated factories where sabotage cannot occur. Blast the man!"

"Does it really affect us, sir?" asked the major. "I mean, we can just take them out of the factories, fail them at the Code and send them back to prison, can't we?"

"We can, but will they stand for it? Of course they won't. They'll see through that one,

all right. We have to be very careful of the civilian population, major. If enough of them get the idea that we are working against Joseph, they may start a cry that we are prejudicing Earth's chances of survival. You know how they are—one opinion one day, the opposite the next. While Joseph seems to have full sway, their antagonism will be against him. But it only needs a few louts to start the word rolling that we are secretly fighting him and there'll be public meetings demanding that Joseph be allowed to have his fling, and, if he fails, *then* fight. They won't realise it'll be too late then. One of the political factions will take up the cry, of course, just to show that it's alert to public feeling. The factional press will blare it out in banner headlines.

"All that will be bad enough, but we could fight it. The real danger is that the two aliens would know the true story. They might not wait for Joseph to finish his messing

about. We've got to remember that, at this stage, they might be able to do things that we wouldn't be able to stop. So we need another idea for the Highway Code business."

The captain coughed. "I've been thinking, sir." He ignored the general's raised eyebrows. "Couldn't we pick out the non-essential people for imprisonment? I mean, if it can be arranged to fail certain people, people who don't contribute very much to running the world, it would reduce the disorganising effect, wouldn't it?"

The general smiled. He looked genuinely happy. "Yes," he said. "We'll do that. And we'll start with logicians!"

WHEN HIS subordinates had gone, the general rose and went into an adjoining room—one into which no one but himself was allowed.

There, he strode across to a wall map on which was traced a zigzagging line—Stebbing's path, as relayed

by the Secret Service. A tickertape machine in the corner had several inches of tape protruding from it, reports that had come in over the past few hours. General Melson broke off the tape, studied it and transferred the information to the map. Then he stood back and eyed the untidy line he had traced.

"Going home now," he muttered. "Maybe catch 'em there."

He went back to his main office and got through on the visiphone to Secret Service. The symbol of identification stared at him impersonally.

"Sometime, I think," he said, "those two missing aliens will visit Joseph at his home. I'd like to know when they get there. It will be difficult to identify them. They look very much like——"

He broke off as the identification symbol faded. The Secret Service evidently had information of its own and did not require the general's.

He went back to his desk rather disconsolately. Then

he brightened, pressed buttons and gave orders.

FOURTEEN HOURS after midnight, Stebbing Joseph sat in his library—he rarely went into any of the other rooms when he was awake—with Margaret Deam and listened to the newscast.

There had been no widespread revolution yet, but, when the Road Controller had put Joseph's new scheme into operation, quite a number of drivers had protested by refusing to use the roads. The masses were taking their examinations in the Highway Code, and those who failed were philosophically accepting their imprisonment—taking the Highway Code with them and studying it diligently.

Industry was rather different, though even here the main response was verbal. The transfer of shares to material goods was being effected and the new system of payment for services rendered was already in operation. Workmen grumbled vocally,

and at length, but they worked. There was little else for them to do. Besides, their three-day holiday each week acted as a sop to their vanity.

The newscast reporters rattled out the tidings in their usual fast and exciting manner. They managed to give the impression that great things were being done to save Earth from annihilation at the hands of the aliens.

"We've got to change our way of life," said one reporter. "There's no avoiding it. We must just accept it and do the best we can. Maybe we don't like it—but we'd like extinction a hell of a lot less. Some people feel that a better man than Stebbing Joseph could have been chosen to make these changes—or better still, a group of men. But the people from the stars have made their choice and we have to abide by it. Remember, there is no cause for panic. The people of Earth are responding magnificently to this, their greatest hour. Stay where you are and get on

with your job. And good luck to everybody!"

"Same old stuff," said Stebbing, switching off. "They've heard it all before, you know."

"I know," Margaret Deam smiled. "We've been listening to all your radio stations for several centuries. Every programme is on record. We heard all those speeches from your leaders that appealed to the emotions and not the senses. That is one of the reasons why . . . but I'd better not talk about that."

Still, Stebbing thought, it was a hint. The star people evidently took a poor view of emotional propaganda. That was something else he could work on. But at the moment, another thing was troubling him.

"Notice there was no word about the health services?" he said. "That must mean that the Health Controller has gone back on his word. That's the worst of extracting a promise under duress."

"What are you going to do about it?" Margaret asked.

"Ask you to help me. I can't do these things single-handed, you know. If you could use your powers to implement my ideas, that wouldn't be asking too much, would it?"

Margaret Deam considered for a moment. Then: "No, I don't think Bruce Curtis would mind that. Just a moment."

Stebbing watched her as she closed her eyes and drew her eyebrows together as though in concentration. She looked very beautiful even with the frown. Many terrestrial women would be more than pleased to have those features.

She opened her eyes and looked up. "Bruce says it's all right, but you mustn't think that because we help you with any particular problem, we believe that you are tackling it the right way."

"That's understood," Stebbing answered. "So your race is telepathic, too?"

"Yes," Margaret said, shortly. "Now what do you want me to do?"

Evidently she did not intend to be questioned about her powers. Stebbing accepted the dismissal of the topic.

"Make a few drug research laboratories disappear, then follow up with a couple of maternity hospitals."

Margaret Deam did not look in the least surprised. "All right," she said. "It will take a little time. You can forget about it for now. Tell me, what do you hope to accomplish by closing the maternity hospitals?"

"Natural childbirth," Stebbing replied. "For century after century this perfectly normal function has been a source of fear and anxiety to women—so much so that many of them refuse to have children because of it. And the thing that continually maintains this attitude is the maternity hospital. Women go there—weeks too early—because they think they are in danger at home. And when they get there, the treatment they receive makes them want to avoid motherhood for the

rest of their lives. The chances of infection were demonstrated to be higher even as long ago as the twentieth century, and the old bugbear of 'stitches' is practically unknown outside maternity hospitals. Coupled with that is the general rush and bother of inadequate staffs trying to look after too many 'patients'—they are even called patients, though they are perfectly healthy women.

"So, by closing down the maternity hospitals, I shall force the women to have their babies at home. In a little while they will realise how simple and easy the whole thing is that way."

Margaret nodded. "And what about those things your people call 'complications'?"

"They are pathological and so their place is the hospital—the ordinary hospital. They do some really fine work. Under the new Act they become even more extensively endowed."

"I see," said Margaret.

"Now I'd suggest you turn on the radio."

Stebbing did so. The set opened into the middle of an agitated speech by a reporter, whose voice was trembling.

". . . entirely disappeared. Though there is no real evidence of the cause of this catastrophe, it is known that Stebbing Joseph yesterday ordered the Health Controller to bring all drug research to an end. This destruction of five modern research blocks may be some kind of retaliation for the controller's refusing to implement Joseph's instructions——"

He broke off. Rustling paper sounds came from the set. Then:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is even worse! Reports have just come in that six maternity hospitals have now disappeared, together with all persons inside them. Though it is understandable that this major disaster will cause anxiety in many hearts, we ask you once more to remain calm. Do not panic. Stay

where you are. Get on with your job.

"It is feared that more than fifteen thousand people have lost their lives in the research labs. We believe that——"

Stebbing cut him off. "He didn't say that the situation was under control!" He laughed. Then he became more serious. "I take it that these buildings and people have merely been transvibrated? They're not dead?"

"That's right. They can be brought back at any time. But of course, only you and we know that."

"Good. I hope you'll look upon this as a general principle. I don't want to decimate the population!" He laughed as he said it, but Stebbing was quite sincere.

"So somebody or other is keeping tabs on us," he said, after a pause. "That mouse was probably the same kind of thing as the moth—a robot trailer. Clever, as you say, Margaret. General Melson's work, I suppose. I wonder if I should do anything about it?"

Probably not. I think I'll get some rest."

"I think you'd better," said Margaret Deam.

AND WHILE HE SLEPT, the world stirred and rumbled and went noisily to ruin. The disappearance of the maternity hospitals had acted like a spark to all the fear and trembling that had afflicted the people since the alien spaceship had landed. They surged around the centres of control, demanding action against the aliens and against Joseph. General Melson had to call out the riot squads—and they were hardly effective. The soldiers felt much the same as the population.

The Press took up the tale and rushed through several special editions, picturing the bare, desolate space where once had stood, as the papers put it—"splendid towering monuments to man's humanity, filled with joyous mothers and babbling babes. Now all gone, lost forever at the hands or command of an Earthman,

treacherously acting for aliens. What can we do? At least let us do something. At a time like this, the Government should forget its . . ."

And so on. Sponsored radio and television made great capital out of the loss of capital, paradoxically but cleverly. Investors were portrayed as the men who kept industry stable, who gave the working man his job and paid his wages; who kept up the supply of consumer goods so that the people might live at a higher standard than ever before in man's history.

The automobile societies came in with their condemnation of a man who, with ulterior motives, was paralysing the roads and airways, breaking down communications and generally disrupting the whole world.

Gone was the pretence that the world should accede to Joseph's demands. Vanished was the fear that the aliens would summarily destroy the world without giving it a chance to modify itself. In

the general panic and racing anger, all discretion was lost, all caution thrown upon the winds that carried the shoutings and exhortations around the world.

Mobs hurled themselves against the military barricades around Joseph's house and the spaceship. What once had been deserted fields and lanes, now swarmed with human ferocity, armed with primitive weapons. They were thrown back by the troops under direct orders from the general.

A new cry was taken up by the crowds around the spaceship and relayed in the usual mysterious fashion to distant mobs. If General Melson did nothing but protect the man who was ruining Earth, selling out his native planet, then the general should be relieved of his commands and a more aggressive soldier elevated in his stead.

When, over loudspeakers specially erected around the perimeter of the defending force, the general's voice came, demanding, pleading, exhort-

ing calm and conscience, the crowds roared their angry disapproval and drowned him out. They stormed the barricades with even more sinister intent. Reluctantly, the general gave the order to his men to fire. His men would have been massacred otherwise.

So the crowds were massacred instead; they were burned up, disintegrated and dispersed. And the news of it travelled fast throughout the country, stirring up greater hate and greater havoc. The people now had two enemies—the aliens and the military, and their rioting took strength from the combination.

The general now had two tasks, quelling the insurrection and keeping pace with the work of the aliens and Joseph. Soon, there came a third enemy for the military—and another source of death for the people.

Overseas, the news of the disappearing soldiers, weapons, research buildings and maternity hospitals had not been received in tranquil

acceptance. The tales of riots and civil insurrection, coupled with the obvious inability of the military to do anything about it or about the aliens, had aroused deep concern in some quarters.

The danger might spread, the argument went. People and places all over the world might suddenly disappear, taking loved ones into an uncertain hell of torment. Already, Joseph's edicts had created chaos and confusion in every sizeable piece of land. Already, the people overseas were fermenting, bridling, straining under an almost unbearable load of suspense and suspicion. "When would it happen here?" was the question. "When will we disappear? Why should the aliens restrict their foul deeds to the country where they had first landed? *Any moment they might come!*"

So overseas military authorities decided to ignore their subordination to General Melson. They resolved to put an end to the menace of these

creatures from the stars, in the only way possible. In parenthesis and in private, they also thought that after such a splendid display of their abilities, the people of the world would demand that they be instated as military leaders.

While the mobs around the alien spaceship slowly dispersed, and while Stebbing Joseph and Margaret Deam watched sadly from the windows of the house, men far away sought out a hidden key and opened hidden doors and brought out a thing that had lain quiet and thankfully forgotten for centuries.

They loaded it upon a plane and sent the plane soaring into the air, high, higher than sound or sight or singing. And the plane sped through the thin air, its pilot trembling in the cockpit, terribly, startingly conscious of what lay in the long sleek belly, waiting, softly ticking, waiting for his fingers to press the ultimate button and send it to freedom through swinging doors.

The dark cold air of night had gone rushing before the sun's warm searching fingers. Below the plane, incredibly far below, the green fields merged into a sunny carpet. Through viewers the pilot saw a vague ring of brown, and in the centre, a dot. Such a small dot. Such a tiny thing to cause so much trouble and despair. But the dot must go, and with it the brown ring.

The pilot silently asked forgiveness of his comrades in arms below—and pressed the button.

STEBBING'S KNUCKLES were white where they gripped the window sill. The last straggling survivors of the dispersed mob were moving in among the trees of the woods, stopping to look back and shake angry fists at the troops, at Stebbing, at the spaceship.

"They are so young in mind, so old in heart!" he said, and his voice trembled. "Why did they have to do

this? Why can't they *see* it is for their good, for their survival?"

Margaret Deam said nothing. She stood beside Stebbing and stared out across the scarred, green fields at the retreating forms.

"If they had waited a few more days, if they had only given my schemes a chance to work..." Stebbing raised his head. The high whine of a jet plane was sounding from high in the sky. It's come to reconnoitre, Stebbing thought.

Behind him, the radio blared out its tidings of death and destruction. The mobs were fighting amongst themselves. Life and business was at a standstill. Nothing and no one was working. Blood ran in the streets. Control centres were attacked before the military could form defences, their windows smashed, their personnel dragged out into the thoroughfares and battered to death—typists, lift-men, executives, cleaners. It made no difference how culpable the individual. They

died together under the rain of frenzied blows. And some took too long to die. . . .

Beyond the shores, in other lands, more insurrections had broken out. A hot, vicious tide of hate and murder was sweeping the world . . .

Somewhere, somebody was telling the world that they intended to do something about it, that they *had* done something about it. It was all very vague . . .

At the window of his library, Stebbing stared out across the lush landscape of his land. It wore an air of peace, broken only by the high whine of the jet plane above. Then another whine joined the first, shriller but not so loud.

Stebbing jerked his head upwards again as the second whine lost pitch in a slow, menacing reversed arpeggio.

"A bomb!" he said. "They've dropped a bomb!"

He grabbed Margaret's arm and made as if to pull her away from the window. But she

shook herself loose and smiled at him gravely.

"It does not matter. Just watch."

The whine was much lower now. Obviously the bomb had been released at a tremendous height, but there was no mistaking what it was. Even the soldiers on the barricade were leaving their posts, streaking for the woods with anxious, frightened glances upwards.

"But you don't understand!" Stebbing shouted. "This is not just an atomic bomb. They'll have used the most powerful thing they've got—the implosive zeutritium bomb!"

"I know," Margaret Deam said, calmly. "Wait and watch."

Stebbing would have liked to believe her, but his own knowledge of the destructive power of the bomb was too great. He let go her arm and was about to leave when the bomb struck.

There was no interval of time between the cessation of

the low whine and the flash. As one stopped the other happened. The whole world became so bright that Stebbing thought he would never see again—and yet, incredibly and inexplicably and indescribably, the flash seemed to stop just beyond the road and did not reach the window.

Then came the sound. It was tremendous, unbelievably loud and long. It seemed to have a force, a tangible weight of its own. Yet this too was heard by Stebbing as though it came through giant filters, dulled and softened for his ears. But he *knew* how loud the sound really was.

And then came the blast and the fire and the radiation and the sucking vacuum. It beat against Stebbing's mind with overpowering force, gigantic, miraculous, incredible, fantastically huge and potent and destructive—yet startlingly remote, as though it were all happening on some other plane of existence than his.

And all the while, for

minutes on end, Stebbing could see nothing but light and fire and smoke beyond his window. The world was blotted out while the shifting, swaying, darting natural forces danced their macabre ballet before his eyes.

He should have gone, he knew at the back of his mind. The house should have gone, turned to atoms or less than atoms. He should now be energy, part of the swirling, triumphant panorama of destruction that eddied and flowed, dipped and rose and sang in a throaty roar before the window.

Yet he was whole. His house was whole. It seemed that he and Margaret and the house were alone, the only material things in a universe of sound and light and force.

For minutes on end he stood and stared, forgetting, almost, to breathe. Not moving, not speaking, hardly thinking, under the tremendous emotional impact of the unleashed, ferocious fundamental forces of nature.

THEN, AS the smoke began to clear, the sound began to die, the light began to fade, he moved. And fell down.

His legs had been so tightly pressed against the wall beneath the window, the muscles so taut, that with the release of pressure they gave way and sent him sprawling.

Margaret came to him and helped him to his feet. She said nothing. She led him back to the window, and, together, they looked out.

It was dark, like the nights of yester-year. The soaring pall of blackness reached up into the sky, blotting out the artificial suns' light—if they still existed.

Below the pall, red and purple fires burned, with here and there a spurt of livid green, casting gigantic shadows.

Stebbing gasped and found that he had not the power to stare hard enough. The shadows fell, thickly and blackly across a tremendous gulf. As Stebbing's eyes regained their powers of focusing, he

saw that the fires were miles away—fifty at least—so huge and towering that they seemed within throwing distance. And between Stebbing and the fires was the gulf, so deep he could not see the bottom, so wide he could not see its edge. Black, smouldering—a death-bowl of man's creating—the gulf extended beyond the limits of Stebbing's vision.

And yet, rising from the centre, like a golfer's tee, like an eastern minaret, was a mound of earth. And on its top the alien spaceship, unscarred.

Around the ship a narrow circle of green grass . . .

The sight of it brought Stebbing to his senses. He stared at the gulf and then at the mound, at the spaceship, and then at the confines of his own library. He looked at Margaret.

"Your people have the power to protect yourselves from *that*?" His voice was low, slow and deliberate. There was no question in his tone. Only wonder. Only awe.

And a little fear.

"Much more than that," said Margaret, quietly. "Our powers are infinite."

Stebbing turned again to the scene beyond his window. "I believe you," he said.

Beyond the purple fires was a spreading haze of red that mounted to the sky in crimson triumph.

"My world," said Stebbing. "My world, what have you done!"

GENERAL MELSON looked and felt more tired than he ever had before. His puckered face was grey and taut. His eyelids drooped and his shoulders were rounded. There was stubble on his chin. He rested weary arms on the top of his desk and stared morosely at his subordinates.

"At least that's one side of our problems solved," he said, heavily. "Joseph and the spaceship are destroyed." What the other two will do, roaming around among the people, we can't tell. We

must concentrate on restoring order."

The major and the captain sat in chairs before the general's desk—a concession to their exhausted bodies, which drooped like plants deprived of water. They nodded, too tired to say anything, too tired to argue. The general's statement made it sound as though a minor riot had occurred, but they had been working at the highest pitch for several days and there seemed no point, no purpose, in contradicting the general.

The military, under General Melson's orders, had tried with all their might, short of large scale shooting, to quell the mobs. They had succeeded only in protecting vital targets and confining the crowds to regions.

The people still swirled angrily within their barricaded confines, murmuring and sullen, waiting for the next crisis that would stir them to activity again. Fighting was restricted to periodic attacks on the troops manning

the barricades, sorties of no real importance. But the spirit of rebellion was still there. The gnawing fear, the stark panic that fed the fires of revolt were still lurking darkly in the minds of the people. Frustration rippled beneath the surface.

"If those damned fools hadn't dropped the bomb, we might have got somewhere," said the general. "Our riot strategy was beginning to have an effect. Now, we've got international complications as well!"

For the dropping of the bomb, that had wiped out three hundred square miles of land, had resurrected national prejudices that had lain dormant for centuries. There was no doubt about where the bomb had come from. The powers in that land had boasted of it—until reports had begun to come in of the world's reactions, then the powers had shifted the approach to one of justification.

They had been right, they claimed, to unleash death on

more than a million people, to convert three hundred square miles of land into a radioactive wilderness that would kill all comers for many years to come. How else could this menace from the stars be countered? It was a case of the few perishing so that the majority might live.

But such arguments, rational or not, had little effect upon the peoples of the world, even the people within the land that had launched the bomb. At this moment in lands beyond the sea, civil and international war was being waged simultaneously. The hard-won structure of a unified culture was revealing itself as the artificial, unstable hypocrisy that it was—and was crumbling, *had* crumbled, under the impact of the troubled times.

The world was right back where it was in the so-called Unreasonable Ages. The only difference was—that the present world was worse.

"This was my best laid scheme," said the general.

"The greatest piece of planning of my career." He grunted. "And, like all the best laid schemes of mice and men, it went awry."

Silence came down over the general's office as the men, remote from each other in mind and soul, stared fixedly before them and thought their own personal thoughts. There was nothing to be done for the present. The general's orders were keeping a closepressed thumb on the people. It was simply a question of waiting to see what happened next.

And yet they felt they should be doing something . . .

All three jumped when the visiphone buzzed. The general collected himself and nodded towards the instrument. The captain walked tiredly across and switched it on.

As the screen cleared, the general stared at it with unbelieving eyes. The face of Stebbing Joseph looked out at him.

Stebbing's face was as



Illustrated by Davis

drawn and tight as the general's. His eyes were as sad, his lips as thin. A faint frown puckered his forehead—telling of the concentration needed to keep awake, to summon the energy to speak.

"Why did they do it, general?" he asked. "Why did they have to be so primitive?"

The general did not reply. He knew that Stebbing wanted no answer from him. The man was simply stating how he felt.

The general asked his own question. "You should be dead, Stebbing. The whole of your area——" The general stopped, his face grew greyer, his eyes a little more alert. "Does this mean——?"

Stebbing nodded. "Yes, general. It means that the aliens are untouched by the greatest forces at our disposal. Their powers are—infinite. Do you see now, general, how wrong you have been?"

The general stared at Stebbing without seeing him. "Untouched . . . by the zeutritium

bomb . . . all we have . . . nothing more powerful . . . killed a million of us . . ." my God!"

"There is nothing to be done, you see, general," Stebbing said, quietly. "It is something that you should have realised at the beginning. We cannot fight these people. We must accede to their demands."

Much of the tiredness seemed to drop away from General Melson. His shoulders straightened and his jaw became firm. He leaned forward and spoke with precision.

"You've got it wrong, Joseph. It's not that we can't fight. It's that we can't win. No one and nothing can stop us fighting!"

Stebbing's face took on an irritated expression—sign of his fatigue. "But can't you see how irrational that is? Why can't you be logical and accept this thing? That way we might all benefit."

"Men don't live by logic, Joseph. Not men with real

blood in their veins. They live by their hearts. And one of the things our hearts want is freedom. We shall fight this slavery imposed on us from the stars. Even if we perish in the attempt—as seems most likely—we shall fight! Because we are men. Because we are not machines!”

“But you *are* behaving like machines!” Stebbing shouted. “Blind and unswerving and predictable. An electronics man could make a machine in ten minutes that would react as you are reacting! Stock response to stock stimulus. There’s no analysis, no scanning of the stimulus to understand its real meaning.” He paused for breath, but only for a moment. He hurried on.

“You say that one of your desires is freedom. And you’d probably say that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. But you are wrong! The real price of freedom is eternal tolerance. Tolerance to other ways of thought and other ways of living. So tolerant that you can, when necessary,

forget your own arbitrary system and become incorporated into some other arbitrary system—for the general good, for the preservation of your existence and the evolution of your race.”

“If we were gods!” said the general. “But as I told you before, we are men—*men*, Joseph! We have faults and failings, we make mistakes and we harbour prejudices. But above and beyond it all we *believe* in ourselves. We need to, for our self respect. And for our self respect we must fight the aliens and their desires. We want none of their culture. Let them keep it!”

Stebbing nodded slowly, as though beginning to accept the fact that he had lost. “So said the aborigines. So said the Veddas. So said the American Indians. So said the Tibetans. And they died, all of them. Their cultures, their races, have gone, except from the pages of history books.”

“Inevitable,” said the gen-

eral. "That's the way it has to be."

Stebbing roused himself at the words. "But that's a fallacy! You believe it because you prefer to forget the times when it isn't true. Remember the Japanese, the Indians, the Chinese, the Persians, the Egyptians, the Spanish, the Jews, the Argentinians—all of them accepted the idea of a world culture different from their own. They incorporated the ideas and living habits of another culture into their own way of life, willingly, eagerly. And see how their culture grew, see how they became powers to be reckoned with by the whole world. Look, general, at the high status that those nations now hold in the unified world, and compare it with their origins, their native cultures. Men whose ancestors bowed down in loincloths to poles of carven wood, now sit in deliberation on world affairs."

The general wiped a hand across his brow. Some of the

stoop was coming back to his shoulders. "But they are all men, Joseph. You seem to forget that. They did not have to rearrange their lives according to the dictates of inhuman creatures. They merely adapted themselves to the majority decision—of their own species."

Stebbing's irritation flared up again. "Why can't you drive out this narrow attitude to existence? What is the human race but a species of universal life? All I am asking—all that the aliens are asking—is that we adapt ourselves to the decision of the majority of intelligent races in the galaxy. Just as those native cultures changed and took their place among the larger class of men, so must we change and take our place among the larger class of sentient beings! The difference is a matter of scale and degree, not of kind?"

"Not of kind!" the general thundered, his basic prejudices shocked. "You consider that these arrogant creatures

from the stars are of the same kind as man!"

Stebbing looked intently at the general. "Men once said that sort of thing about negroes, you know. The creatures from the stars have hearts, minds, desires, and hurts, just as we have."

"You are saying they are human?" the general roared, his blood racing through old, tight veins.

"That is a question of definition," Stebbing said, impatiently. "I am concerned with things, not words. It doesn't matter what you call these people—the things that make them what they are, differ but little from the things that make us what we are. Why, two of them are among our people now, have been for days, and no one has recognised them!"

"Because they are acting," the general stormed. "Going round in a cloak of false humanity to effect their foul aims! Enough of this gabble, Joseph. Just remember that we shall fight to the last, that

we shall *never* surrender our freedom to these—these monsters!"

There was silence for a moment while Stebbing eyed the general. Then: "So there is no hope that we could work together? I had hoped that if I talked to you——"

"Rot!" exclaimed the general. "You hoped you could wheedle round me with soft words and sentimental arguments. Well, you can't! Your work and mine, Joseph, are a whole galaxy apart. You work for the stars. I work for Earth—and for humanity!"

Stebbing smiled sadly. "The two may be the same, general. At least they can be reconciled and——"

The general signalled irritably to the captain, who immediately went across and switched off the visiphone. Stebbing's pathetically earnest features disappeared in a sudden swirl of green haze.

"I do believe the man's insane!" the general said. "And yet he used to be regarded as one of the best

brains on Earth. Maybe the aliens did something to his mind. Still, it makes no difference. By heaven, I want some action! Major—go and get those reconnaissance pictures of the spaceship.

STEBBING JOSEPH switched off the dead visiphone and turned tiredly to Margaret Deam. She looked as fresh and healthy as ever, even though she had shared every minute of his vigil at the radio, listening to the progressive decline of order in the world.

"It seems I have lost," he said. "I thought—I thought I might . . . that the general might . . . but he is tied up with prejudice and bubbling over with indignation." He stared at Margaret's steady eyes. "This was my best laid scheme, Margaret. I planned it better than anything else ever before, even my system of symbolic logic." He shrugged. "And like all the best laid schemes of mice and men—it went awry."

"That's been said so many times," Margaret murmured.

"Does it always have to be true? Is your Earth fundamentally like that? Must all great schemes leave us—what was it your poet said?—'leave us nought but grief and pain for promised joy'—is that the truth?"

"Who am I to judge?" Stebbing said. "Do you remember the last verse of that great poem?"

"Still thou art blessed, compared wi' me!

The present only toucheth thee:

But, Och! I backward cast my e'e

'On prospects drear!

An' forward tho' I canna see,

I guess an' fear!"

That's all I can do, Margaret—guess and fear. Guess that I have failed in your eyes and those of your colleagues. Fear that the destruction of Earth is near. You—cannot tell me, I suppose?"

Margaret Deam shook her head. There was a sadness in her eyes that had only just

appeared. She looked, Stebbing thought, serenely, sadly beautiful.

"You must wait until Bruce Curtis and Graham Slade return," she said. "Then you will be told. Tell me, did you really believe you would succeed, that logic would triumph over emotion?"

Stebbing paced the library. His nerves were understandably on edge. Outside his window lay a greater area of devastation than had ever before existed on Earth. Beyond it, at home and abroad, milled millions in anger and fear, and sinister panic stirred. And away in his headquarters, General Melson was planning to fight to the last. It was a time of nervous tension for all—logicians no less than lesser men.

"I don't know," Stebbing said. "I just don't know. It's so easy to convince myself that I did. All my life I've believed that a system of logic, if supported by enough power and persuasion, could transform the world into something

very like a paradise—simply by taking away the hate and greed and bigotry and selfishness. My personal philosophy is built on those principles. But when the opportunity came, when your people gave me the support and the power—well, I'm not so sure. That is what hurts. I've a feeling at the back of my mind that I looked upon the whole thing as an experiment. I might have subconsciously known that it would fail. I don't know. I just hoped so much that it could succeed."

He had gone to the window. Now he swung round and faced Margaret Deam. "Why did it fail, Margaret? Why did they fight against me? I was only trying to take the fear and heartaches and persecution from their lives! Why did they snap back at me as though I were being cruel to them?"

Margaret did not stir in her chair. "Perhaps you *were* being cruel," she said softly. "Perhaps your people *like* fear and hate and heartaches.

Perhaps they felt that with those things gone there would be nothing left. Perhaps their lives are based on those principles."

Stebbing said nothing for a while, just looked at Margaret in the long silence of the library. Then: "How could such a race ever hope to live among the stars?" he said. "Their hope is despair, their triumph defeat. They haven't a chance!"

"The others will be here soon," said Margaret. "They will tell you about that."

"FEEL YOUR WAY carefully," said the general, "and don't make any noise. Can everybody hear me through this damned contraption?"

One by one the subdued, slightly distorted voices of the twelve men answered him through the intercom system of their anti-radioactivity suits.

"All right, then," the general responded. "Let's go."

The twelve men moved off on foot, through the darkness

and loose earth, down and down.

Hours before, in the safety of his office, General Melson had studied the reconnaissance photographs. The pictures, taken at enormous height, still clearly showed the great bowl that had been scooped from the ground by the zeutritium bomb. They showed the rim of it and a little of the steeply shelving sides, but not the bottom; that was too far down.

And all around the bowl lay barren, burnt desolation. For more than a hundred miles there was nothing living or constructed still existing. Death had passed that way in a great flaming hurry. Its footsteps were large, flat and black.

The general peered at the photographs through lenses. Then he sat back, thinking. It appeared to the captain and to the major that he was trying to reach a difficult decision. At last the general spoke.

"I'm going back years and years," he said. "During

those years I've sat in this office and directed things from this chair. That's not the way of a soldier! I'm going out into the field." He glared at the captain and the major. "This, I think, will be our last battle. With luck, we may win it; if we do, there'll be no need for others. If we lose, as well we may, we won't be here for others. I want twelve volunteers."

The captain and the major shuffled their feet and looked at him. They were very tired.

"Could we know what you plan, sir?" the major asked.

"Come here," said the general.

The major leaned over the general's desk and peered at the photographs. The general's lean finger came down on one, shifted to a certain point, stayed there. The captain looked too. Then the subordinates stood up, frowning in puzzled fashion. Then:

"Oh," said the major. "Oh, I see! Count me in!"

"Me, too," said the captain.

"I've just caught on. Yes, please!"

And so ten men, the captain, the major and their general had set out by jeticopter for the region of destruction. At a safe distance they stopped and climbed into their protective clothing. From the jeticopter they took a land-rover vehicle—the terrain ahead was unsuitable for landings from the air.

The landrover took them a little way inside the flattened area and then stopped. The ground was too battered for further progress in the vehicle. The men moved forward on foot.

And as they moved, so light declined. The artificial suns had been destroyed by the bomb, and darkness settled about them until earth and sky blended in one black sheet. The men moved on, towards the great yawning bowl.

Arrived at the edge, the general checked the intercom and then gave the order to proceed. And now the men were clawing their way down

the sides of the great bowl, slipping and sliding and falling and swearing.

Periodically the general checked that all the men were still present by asking them to call over the intercom. At one such time only ten men answered.

"Where's Carson and Macbride?" the general demanded. "Are you around, you two?"

No answer came across the intercom.

"Shall I flash a lamp, sir?" asked the major.

"No! We mustn't be seen. Ruin the whole damned thing." His voice softened. "I suppose—they were trapped by a fall of earth."

"Could be, sir," sounded the captain's bright young voice. "Or fell into one of those pits of embers."

"Yes," said the general. He paused a moment. "Well, we'd better get on."

Down and down the twelve men climbed, avoiding the looser masses, skirting the dull ember pits that studded the side of the bowl. It was

exhausting work. The protective suits were hot and stuffy, the goggles smeary with condensed perspiration.

Suddenly a voice came over the intercom. "Hey! It's going up. It's going up at last!"

"Steady," said the general, "steady. Where the blazes are you, anyway? Oh, there you are. Yes, you're right. Here we are, men. Up we go. As near as we can, remember. Keep close together. *And don't make a noise!*"

In the centre of the great crater, the men climbed expertly up the steep sides of the mound. Foot by foot. Yard by yard. They neared the top.

"This is about as far as we'll get, I think," one of the men said. "Too damned steep above."

"Let's have a look," said the general. "Yes, we can go up a bit more. Watch me!"

The men could not watch him; there was no light by which to see. But they heard

his heavy breathing and they pressed close behind him.

"All right," the general said at last. "We'll stop here. Get to work. And—*quickly!*"

The men sprang to their task, mentally if not physically. This was their great moment, the moment for which they had volunteered—the moment, each of them knew, that would decide Earth's fate.

They slipped the heavy equipment from their sore shoulders, grateful for the loss of weight and encumbrance. They dug and drilled. Far into the mound, with silent pressor beams, they scoured a channel. And as the beam ate into the earth, so the men fed in a line, in sections, of high explosive.

The general stayed near the entrance to the channel, counting the sections as they were pushed through. From the photographs he had calculated the distance to the centre of the mound—roughly. He would allow a few feet extra, just in case.

Piece by piece, the explosive

was rammed into the hole. Each piece was connected by a short link to a long coaxial cable that slid in beside the explosive chain. At the other end of the cable was a firing plunger, locked in the off position.

"They did this sort of thing back in the twentieth century!" one cheerful voice said laconically over the intercom. "Nothing like old-fashioned ideas to win an ultra-modern war!"

"Shut up and get on with your job!" the general said. "Time for funny remarks when we get back."

The men laboured on. At length the general called a halt. Earth was packed in around the opening of the drilled channel. Then the men began to move away, trailing the long coaxial cable behind them.

Suddenly the general halted. "Blow me down!" he exclaimed softly. "Look at that light. That must be Joseph's house. Come on, we'll go up that way!"

That way was just as difficult as the way they had come. So it made no difference. But somehow the general managed to move faster than on the inward trip. He moved rapidly ahead of his men, urging them to speed up time and again.

Finally he stopped, a few hundred yards down the bowl, immediately below the light of Joseph's house. The men gathered around him.

"Where's that damned plunger?" he demanded. "Right. Now watch!"

Across the bowl, dull and indistinct in the light from Joseph's house, the mound of earth rose up like a rough, gaunt statue by Rodin. The statue's head was the dark blur of the domed alien spaceship.

The general pushed down the plunger.

STEBBING jumped when the door opened quietly, and his anxiety was only slightly relieved when he saw the two aliens enter.

Bruce Curtis and Graham Slade smiled at him. To Stebbing they looked just the same as when he had first seen them so long ago when they floated through his window. Unscathed, with no sign that they had been out among the rioting mobs.

"Look," said Stebbing, "there's no need to delay things, you know. You may as well give me your verdict right away. I—I guess I know what it's going to be."

Bruce Curtis stared at Stebbing. "You think you have failed?"

Stebbing shrugged. "You have seen my world. You saw it in comparative peace when you landed. Now you have seen it at war. You know that chaos rules the day all over the planet. Death and destruction have raced across the face of the world. That, I think you will feel, is failure. I didn't do my job. Indeed, I made things worse."

Bruce Curtis nodded thoughtfully, his strong lean face showing up its perfect

moulding under the lamps. "And yet, you know," he said, rather sadly, "we found a number of things to like among your people. There was the concern of mothers for their children, for instance."

"Anything else?" Stebbing asked, dryly.

Bruce Curtis looked up sharply. "Why do you say it like that?"

"Because that's about the only thing that remains sacred in a riot. Everything else is smashed and looted. Men and women become animals. The pathetic attempts of mothers to protect their children from the marauding mobs is the only human characteristic left among them at such a time."

The alien nodded again. "Your people certainly have periods in which they seem little removed from brute creation. We saw quite a lot of that. But that was, in a sense, exceptional. When they are not rioting, they have

many facets that we found pleasing."

"I dare say," Stebbing said, in a hopeless voice. "But even then, they are so—so *irrational*. Look at the difficulty I had persuading the controllers to put better measures into force. Look at the primitively senseless attitude of General Melson—a man in a position to work wonders—when I suggested that the peoples of Earth be friendly with those from the stars!"

"They have, of course, a strong protective instinct—a proclivity to maintain the status quo. They lack the courage to change. Perhaps that is because there is so little security in your world."

Stebbing splayed out his hands. "I tried to give it to them! That was one of the main principles of my plan. Security of life and health and work."

"And they spurned it. Yes. Your people seem to spend their whole lives searching for personal security, yet fight

the same thing when applied to the whole. There seems to be something at the back of their minds, deep down, that makes a lack of group security the only incentive to progress. So they think up oblique methods of maintaining it. Strange."

Stebbing waited, glancing at the aliens in turn. But they remained silent, as if concentrating their minds on a problem.

Stebbing wondered if they were conversing telepathically, comparing notes, as it were, before giving their final decision. Margaret was staring at the window, into the black night beyond. Bruce Curtis gazed fixedly at the bookshelves. Graham Slade looked at the floor between his feet.

Minutes went by, until Stebbing became certain that the aliens were in conference. They were so totally unaware of him. So immersed in their thoughts.

At length, Bruce Curtis stirred and looked at Steb-

bing. "We have come to our decision," he said, and there was a sad smile on his handsome face.

Stebbing found his legs trembling. It was not easy to be logical and unemotional when the next few seconds might bring the death sentence of the entire world.

"And that is?" he asked, not really needing to.

"We have decided to give your world another chance."

Stebbing jumped and goggled at the alien. "Another——"

"All that has happened since we arrived has taken place in a very short time," said Bruce Curtis. "In a way, we expected it. It was inevitable from the things we had previously discovered about your planet. Now we should like to watch your world recover. From the ashes of a ruined world, many a valuable culture has arisen among the stars of our galaxy. It may be that men have learned a lesson—or that you may teach them one still.

We have been particularly impressed by the lack of overt attacks upon ourselves and our ship; it was somewhat remarkable to us that your military authorities protected it from the—distraught people. That has counted a great deal in our decision."

Stebbing stared at him. He didn't care about the details. All that mattered was that Earth was to be given a second chance. Hope rose once more within him.

The end was not so near—and it might be diverted after all. Somehow, he would get the people to work. Somehow, he would obtain the co-operation of General Melson—take Bruce Curtis along, perhaps. But all that could be settled later. Now, at this moment, the moment of reprieve for Earth, he simply felt profoundly thankful.

"I—I'd like to say how—very grateful——" he began, but his voice was cut off by a terrific detonation, followed by a long slow roaring rumble.

The emotional tension of

the library was released as all four raced for the window. The peace, the pregnancy of the moment, was gone under the startling explosion from outside.

"I saw it," said Margaret Deam. "I was looking at the window and I saw a great flash of light and then a lot of red."

"It seems very clear what has happened," said Bruce Curtis, and his voice was hard. Harder than Stebbing liked.

The logician peered out into the night. The strong light from his window fell across the great bowl and he could see at once that the central mound of earth had practically disappeared—and with it the spaceship.

Suddenly there was an even louder boom and a vivid flash. Tons of earth at the bottom of the bowl were flung upwards, illuminated by the light of the explosion at the bottom.

"The fuel tanks," said Bruce Curtis. "We cut off the shield after the bomb fell. We did not think it was

necessary any more—and it used so much energy. Though our ship was built for interstellar flight, its motor system could not sustain a fall like that without damage. There must have been a spark near the ruptured tanks. I'm afraid the ship is useless now."

He sounded so very sad that Stebbing felt a pang of unusual pity. "I—I'm terribly sorry," he said.

"So am I." Bruce Curtis turned away from the window and stared at his two companions. "There can be no doubt that the ship was blown up deliberately—by your military, no doubt. It must have taken a great deal of courage to cross that radioactivity, to descend the bowl, creep up to an alien ship, plant explosive and run away. Great courage—especially when the motive must have been mainly spite; your people had no means of telling that our ship was so vulnerable. Those men had very great courage. And such courage is dangerous."

The alien's voice was hard

and incisive. Stebbing felt cold. "What do you mean?" he said.

The alien looked away from his companions and faced Joseph. "I mean that courage based upon such childish and irrational motives is not wanted among the stars. Our decision is reversed. Earth will be destroyed at once!"

Stebbing swallowed, feeling life and living slip between his fingers. He clutched at straws. "But—but how can you get back to tell your people? We could build you a ship. We could see that you got back safely—if you'll only give us time."

Bruce Curtis shook his head. "I admire your efforts, of course. All of them. But your world is not like you. As for us, we shall not be going back. Our lives will soon be over, but we will have spared the star culture the contamination of your race. We shall go now. You will have some eight minutes and then—well, the end. Goodbye."

"But—but——!" Stebbing stammered.

"Goodbye, Stebbing," Margaret said.

"Margaret, I——"

"Goodbye," said Graham Slade.

Stebbing stared at them, speechless. Idly, dispassionately, a part of his mind noted that this was the first time Graham Slade had spoken. Similar thoughts flashed through his mind. He was incapable of thinking about anything important.

Before his eyes, the three aliens disappeared.

For seconds on end Stebbing gazed at the spot where they had stood, not blinking, not moving, hardly breathing. It had all been so sudden. The reversal of the decision . . . the change of heart . . . the final sentence . . .

A crashing sounded lower in the house. Stebbing hardly heard it. Boots trampled on the stairs and then the library door was flung open and General Melson strode in.

He took a quick glance around and then went over to Stebbing, who still stood and stared.

"Well, we've done the trick, Joseph! Did you hear it, see it? Thought those aliens might be here with you. Gone somewhere, I suppose. Well, Joseph, this is the beginning of the end."

Stebbing swung his head round and gazed at the general. "How right you are," he said.

"Sure I'm right. Their ship's finished, blown up, scatteroo! Now where are their infinite powers, eh?" He poked Stebbing in the ribs. "Guess they were kidding you, Joseph, old chap. Make you look a proper fool. Never mind, we've got things under control now—or we soon will have. The people will soon settle down now that they know we've done something positive—and pulled it off." He broke off and peered intently at Stebbing. "I say, Joseph, you are listening, aren't you?"

Stebbing was looking at the window. Outside, the fire from the burning fuel still lit the skies. "Not really," he said.

"Put out at being made a mug of, eh? Never you mind, I'll see that you don't get off too badly. Oh, I know it must be a great disappointment to you, but you've got to realise that men can't live by logic. Hello, what's that?"

A dull boom had sounded and the house rocked. The general moved across to the window.

"Another tank gone up, I suppose. Didn't think there was any—— Look! Stebbing, look! The ground's cracking. What's——!"

His words were swept away by the cracking and snapping of the house falling to pieces. Showers of dust enfolded the room. Then Stebbing felt himself falling.

He came to rest, jammed between rafters. Through the gaps he could see the sky,

criss-crossed with flashes. The air was filled with tremendous thunder that smote his ears and made them hurt. The ground shuddered and writhed like a beast in torment. Screams, shrill upon the night, pierced the thunder.

Then came General Melson's voice, shouting against the noise.

"Stebbing! Stebbing! What's happening? Can you hear me? Stebbing!"

Stebbing raised himself on one elbow and gazed at the living flames in the sky. He shouted back at the general, tears streaming from his eyes, his voice cracked and hysterical, all logic gone.

"The world is dying, general. Dying, do you hear? And you killed it, general. You killed it because you are so brave! Because you are—a man!"

Then the wind shrieked loud and shrill. Noisily, in a last shout of destruction, the world came to an end.



(8) SATURN

Mass, 0.9^c of Earth's. Distance from Sun, 886.1 million miles. Year, 29.46 years. Day, 10 hrs. 14 mins. Orbital velocity, 6.0 miles a second. Escape velocity, 22.0 miles per second. Gravity, 1.17 times Earth's. Diameter, 32,120 miles. Density, 0.71 times water. Albedo, 42%. Eccentricity 1° 18' 26".

Saturn is visible to the naked eye as a yellow star brighter than the first magnitude. Through the telescope it is seen to consist of a globoid planet surrounded equatorially by a wide, flat "ring." The globe has a lower density than any other major planet — indicating what is confirmed by other observations, that Saturn has a very deep, cloudy atmosphere. This is almost certainly composed principally of methane and ammonia. Saturn has nine moons ranging in diameter from about 150 to 3,000 miles. The inner five lie more or less on the plane of the rings and form a tight system of their own. Phoebe, the ninth moon, is remarkable in that its motion is retrograde. Japetus, the eighth moon, is noted for having one of its sides about five times brighter than the other; there is no explanation for this. The only satellite in the entire system that has

an atmosphere is Titan, but the air here is unbreathable, being composed, like the primary's, of methane and ammonia.

The ring—or rings, because there appear to be several—are composed of million upon million of tiny particles, whirling at great speed around the primary, like diminutive satellites. One theory of their formation is that a minor planet or asteroid came under the influence of Saturn's gravitational field many years ago and was disintegrated into a mass of particles that now form the rings. This would have been a freak of juxtaposition unparalleled in the solar system.

The three main rings consist of the outermost, separated from the second by a gap—Cassini's Division—and a very faint inner one, known as the Crape ring. The widths of these rings are, respectively, 10,000, 16,000 and 11,000 miles. The diameter across the outer ring is 170,000 miles. Cassini's Division is some 2,000 miles in width. The rings appear to be about 40 miles thick.

There can be no doubt that life as we know it cannot exist under unprotected conditions on Saturn.

A MATEUR TALENT



BY

Dan Morgan

Illustrated by Muller

In light-hearted vein, this story gives us a new slant on alien powers.

That's all right, friend. Nobody is using that seat—not now. Make yourself comfortable. Sit right down and pour yourself a drink. I know you wouldn't be bothering me if this place wasn't so crowded, so don't apologise. The Central Lounge is always this way when two Interstellar ships land on the same day.

I see you've noticed the smell. That's me. They tell me it sometimes takes weeks to wear off. Out on Arcturus IV you get so used to breathing in an atmosphere with a high percentage of skatole that you don't even notice it . . . Oh, you're on the outward trip for Arcturus . . . Well, perhaps I can give you a few pointers. I'm no pioneer, understand; frontier systems are not really in my line. You've probably heard of me—Colonel Potter of the Colonel Potter Amateur Talent Show. You haven't? That's show business for you. You're away a few months

and the public has you dead and buried while you're gone.

I thought about that when Halloran of the Galactica Agency offered me the tour, but I figured that the kind of money he was offering was too good to miss. Fifty thousand Galactic Credits and the fare for the round trip paid, with personal appearances in the main cities of the three Arcturan humanoid planets. With the fare at the rate of a thousand credits per light year, it was impossible to take my regular Solar System troupe, but Halloran had that organised—he only wanted me. The Arcturan Office of Galactica had already lined up a mess of home grown talent for me to audition on arrival.

Apart from saving in fares, I could see that this was a smart move on Halloran's part. After all, ninety per cent. of the appeal in amateur shows is the fact that the artists are the boys and girls from your own home system—if they

were strangers you wouldn't give their crummy acts a second look. The acts don't matter a deal, anyway, so long as there's a good producer and M.C. That's my speciality. The proposition sounded good, so I let him talk me into it. Maybe I should have known better, but we all make mistakes.

The trip out was quite an experience. I'd never been out of the Solar System before. Apart from some nasty twinges when the ship went in and out of Warp it was a real pleasant month. Galactica had laid on a big reception when I landed on Arcturus IV. I was met by their local agent, a native Arcturan by the name of Kloof. The reception was fine, but the main thing that impressed me was the smell. Halloran had omitted to tell me about that—I like to think that he didn't know. This Kloof was a smooth character with slick black hair and a pale green complexion. This gave me quite a jolt at first—I thought may-

be the atmosphere was affecting him too, but as I looked around I saw that all the Arcturans were that colour.

I found out later that this is caused by the large amount of chlorophyll in their blood-streams. This is purely a freak of evolution, as in most other ways they are physically the same as you and I. I can't help feeling that whoever was responsible for this evolution was playing it strictly for laughs.

"I've got the top amateur talent of three planets waiting your O.K.," said Kloof as we buzzed over the city in a gyro cab.

"That's fine," I groaned. I felt literally sick of the whole business, but it was too late to back out now—furthermore it would be too expensive. Kloof continued his patter, telling me how he'd had twenty talent scouts dragging the system for acts. Finally we landed on the roof of the local theatre and took an elevator down to the main auditorium. Kloof had weeded

the results of the search down to twenty-five acts, and these performed, one by one, for the final selection. Brother, you never saw a sadder bunch of hams!

There is a tendency in the Solar System for the other planets to look upon Earth as the centre of Art and Culture. That went double for these Arcturans, and most of them were doing what they fondly imagined were Earth-type acts. Most of their ideas had been lifted from the latest imported Earth Tri Di films, so I wasn't surprised to find that most of their stuff was so dated that it was almost original. That crook Barney Foster must be making a fortune buying up old films and shipping them out to Arcturus.

The acts were all in the same class—terrible. The singers proved that Arcturans are ninety per cent. tin ears, and the comedians could have made big money as morticians. Kloof seemed to enjoy some of them, so I decided to book

the ones that got the best reaction from him and hope for the best. They all left me cold, but I reasoned that Kloof's outlook was nearer to the Arcturan average than my own.

Along about the twentieth act somebody started a loud argument at the back of the auditorium, and a minute later a small Arcturan youth appeared in front of us, hotly pursued by a harassed looking doorman. Kloof took one look at the kid and turned a deeper shade of green.

"I've told you before, son," he said. "We can't use you; your act is kid's stuff." He turned to the doorman. "Throw him out, Guval. If he gets in here again you're fired." The kid made as if to speak to me, but the doorman grabbed him by the seat of his pants and propelled him down the aisle before he had a chance.

"What in Mercury was all that about?" I said.

"Aah, some fool kid trying

to get into the show," said Kloof. "He's got nothing."

Him and all these other acts, I thought. The only thing about the whole performance which impressed me was the snappy stage direction. It included a complete change of scenery for each act, and what scenery! At one time there was a horrible vocalist moaning about having left his heart on the moon of Arcturus IV, and as a climax a very solid-looking half-size spaceship took off from the stage and flew into the wings. I asked Kloof if it was done by wires, because I couldn't see any.

"Of course not," he said, and laughed. As he seemed to look upon it as so elementary I didn't show my ignorance by asking any further questions—I figured that the Arcturans must have worked out some system of Anti Grav and Tractor Beams to lug scenery about. The rest of the talent ploughed through their bits of nonsense, and afterwards Kloof and I went into con-

ference and picked out the ten least harrowing. That was the show. I licked them into some sort of shape in the remaining seven days before our opening date and kept praying.

Much to my disgust the Colonel Potter Arcturan Amateur Talent Show was a big hit—all but for one item. You've guessed it, friend. The local acts went over fine, but my own sure-fire, slick M.C. patter was a bust. I laid a bigger egg than a Venusian Yawk bird. The tour had only been going a couple of weeks when I had a Stat message from Kloof telling me to report at his office in Central City.

When I got there his secretary kept me waiting in the outer office for over half an hour. This I had seen before—the old freeze treatment. When she finally showed me in, Kloof looked up from his desk with a typical ten percent smile.

"Sit down, colonel," he said. He passed me a pile of

Stat messages. "You might like to look at this fan mail." I riffled through them quickly. The general consensus of opinion was obvious—"Get that bum Potter out of our talent show!" I started to fry.

"I'm sorry about this, old man," said Kloof. "But that's the way it's got to be."

"You can't do this to me!" I yelled. "My contract will hold in any court in the Galaxy." Kloof looked at me soothingly.

"Now, now. Let's not lose our tempers," he said. "I know all about your contract. I've been in touch with Halloran and he's given me authority to pay you off in full. You can't kick against that, can you?"

I was deflated. He was right. If Galactica paid me off there was nothing I could do. But the bad publicity! The ridicule! Only the thought of 50,000 Credits stopped me from taking a dive out of the nearest window.

"O.K., if that's the way

you want it," I said. "Let me have the cheque and I'll take the next ship out. It'll be good to breathe fresh air again, anyway."

Kloof opened a drawer and produced a cheque. "There you are, Colonel. No hard feelings, I hope?" he said.

I picked it up and started to get out of the chair. Then I stopped and looked at it closer.

"What are you trying to pull, Kloof?" I yelled. "This cheque is for only 25,000 Credits." I waved the offending object in front of his nose and noticed for the first time a small, pink slip clipped to the under side.

That Halloran! He must have known that the Arcturan government has a quaint little custom of taxing income at source. The pink slip was an Arcturan Treasury receipt for the tax due on my salary at the rate of 50 per cent. of gross—25,000 Credits, no less!

There was nothing more to say. I walked out of the office a broken man. There was a

sleazy little bar across the street and I crawled in to boost up my ego with some local hooch. Halfway through the fourth shot I realised that somebody was standing beside me, talking a blue streak. I looked round and saw it was a young Arcturan.

"You must remember me, colonel," he was saying. "We met at the Palace Theatre when you were holding auditions for the Amateur Show."

I recognised him then; he was the kid Kloof had thrown out. I groaned. That was all I needed—a man can take so much. The kid wasn't daunted. He picked up a pile of assorted glasses and bottles from the bar and started a juggling routine.

Juggling, my life!

The air was full of flying crockery, so I couldn't get off my stool and fade. It took about thirty seconds to filter through my brain that this boy really had something. I'd never seen anything like it, such co-ordination was impossible. Juggling is old stuff,

but this wasn't the ordinary variety—it was supernatural. The kid was balancing a bar stool on his nose and manipulating twenty-five pieces of assorted junk in an intricate pattern that made me dizzy to watch. The other two occupants of the bar were taking no notice at all of the exhibition. Just like these Arcturans, I thought; they wouldn't recognise the most sensational act in the Galaxy if they saw it.

Then it hit me—red letters, a mile high—*The Arcturan Kid, the most sensational juggling act in the Galaxy, presented by Colonel Potter.*

I began to do some quick figuring. This kid could make me a fortune back on Earth, but it would mean spending practically all the remainder of my salary to get him there. Maybe you think that was an awful chance to take with 25,000 Credits, but to me it seemed an airtight cinch. I would be able to net twice that amount in advances, booking such an act in the

Solar System. I didn't waste any time. As soon as the kid stopped for a breather I walked over and grabbed him by the hand.

"You're in, son!" I said. "I'll make a star of you."

"You mean you're going to book me for the Colonel Potter Arcturan Amateur Show?" he said.

"Amateur show, hell," I said. "I'm taking you back to Earth and the real big time!" That scared him a bit at first, but I've handled beginners before, and soon talked him into it.

At the Space Port I booked two passages on an Interstellar ship that happened to be leaving the same day, for Earth. His fare cost me 24,985 Credits, at the standard rate of 1,000 Credits per light year. With the change from the salary cheque and what I had in my pocket, that left my total finances at 25 Credits. But I wasn't worried; I knew that there was a fortune to be made out of this kid.

We spent the trip working

on his act, and it got even better. Sometimes I could almost swear that the flying objects didn't even touch his hands. Every time I looked at him I got a warm feeling about all the Credits he was going to make for me.

When we landed this afternoon I walked off the ship feeling like the Emperor of the Galaxy. The kid didn't look too happy, so I brought him in here.

"What you need is a drink, son," I said. I ordered a couple of Arcturan Subas to give him a homey feeling and started dishing out the pep talk. It didn't seem to do much good, he just sat there like a little green idol, sniffing occasionally. I stopped talking and took a pull at my drink. The kid looked up at me with a queer expression on his face.

"I don't like it here," he said. "The air smells funny." He was missing the skatole, I guess.

"Don't let that worry you, son," I said. "You'll get used

to it—I lived through the atmosphere on your planet, didn't I?"

He sniffed again. "I'm sorry, colonel," he said. "But, honest, I feel ill. I think I ought to go home."

"Go home!" I said. "Are you kidding? Do you realise how much it cost me to bring you here? How much dough have you got, anyway?"

"About ten Credits," he said.

"Then you'll have to stay here," I said. "That's not enough to take you out of sight." He looked surprised.

"You haven't figured out how I do the juggling yet, have you?" he said. "I suppose I should have told you—we Arcturans are gifted

with Telekinesis." Something clicked in my mind. Of course! There was the explanation for the smart scene shifting—no wonder the model spaceship didn't need any wires! Juggling would be kid's stuff on Arcturus.

"I don't need money to get home; you see we're Teleports, too. It's practically the same thing really. Instead of moving other things about, you just move yourself."

I saw red at that point and lunged over the table to grab him. That was a bad move. I must have scared him. He faded away like a puff of smoke and Teleported himself right back to Arcturus—over 24,985 Galactic Credits worth of Space.

The Inner Worlds *and my Uncle*

by M. Dogge

He went by microscope, to an undiscovered universe—it was space travel in reverse . . .

"You accept the infinitely great, but not the infinitely small," said my uncle. "How do you know that there is any limit to the subdivisions of matter?"

"But I thought that was all settled," I said. "Protons, neutrons, down to stress points of hypothetical will-power?"

"I have gone further," said my uncle. "Far enough to prove that we are ourselves so vast as to be of infinite size to any one of these." He waved a pencil at the dancing dots of light on his screen—each dot a stress point of a stress point of an electron.

"But I thought that was where creation started," I said. "The beginning of matter is will-power, or whatever you

call the purposive shaping power, forming an electrical charge."

He screwed a knob at the side of his cabinet and the dots on the screen danced and spread until, suddenly, the single dot in the centre began to send out rippling circles which spread like the ripples of a stone thrown into water. My uncle pointed to one speck on the screen and said: "That's where we are going. But it will take a few hours to get there."

"Where?" I said.

"To inner space—to a world as big as our own, but—the other way. The world of the microscope—the world beyond our reach."

And he set the controls.

"Your friends go out to the stars, but I go inwards to the reverse system. Mass, volume and density, topography and population—they exist in space. Proportionately to their size, the dwellers on those

worlds enjoy all the mysteries of exploration and invention—but it's one sort of galaxy we'll never visit. Too small. But we can take photographs."

"Communication?" I said.

My uncle shook his head. "Anything from us would be too vast at present. I doubt whether they could condense it."

So the inner worlds had been discovered. We were as vast to them as the infinite expanding universe is to us. The effect of my uncle's research was very, very marketable.

You may have read, yourself, of the stir that was created back in the twentieth century, when some scientists discovered that a vacuum containing dust could, under exposure to the sun's rays, show the movement of the dust it contained to resemble the movements observed in the galaxies. The same law for the grain of dust as for the planets.

"After all, why should we be surprised at the evidence of infinity?" said my uncle. "It wouldn't be infinity if it only worked one way."

"I thought," said I, "that everything was sort of backed by a kind of basic jelly or substance of life or something. I thought that was more or less the alternative to believing in a Nothing."

"We are considering a scheme so vast that the mind totters before it," said my uncle. "But, nevertheless, there it is. Can you give me one good reason why there should be any end to creation? Is it likely that the gods slept for ever before earth was born? And man is very recent on this planet."

I stared at the screen.

Without doubt we were looking at the curved surface of a world. It was very much an aerial photograph. And our plane was going to land. But it was not a plane. We were looking through a jet-propelled plastic lens, which magnified at the speed of what came to be known as volitional intent. That is, the light year was now outmoded. The rows of noughts after a figure of distance were now laid aside. You thought to a place and you were there. Time and space were

back where children had always known they were. Right here.

But only to a very few people who had the power of will. It was for the most part a power inherited, fed by the right foods and as rare as snow in June. My uncle was one of the volitional intenders, with the right to put V.I. after his name. Only a V.I. could make any impression on the plastic. I was just lucky—that was how I came to write the account. I couldn't do a thing myself, nor could his children, but they were looking for the power to come out in the third generation.

The picture on the screen was becoming more and more specialised, until a separate, single scene appeared.

"A man," said my uncle. "I want a man, or whatever they have back there."

He succeeded in focusing on a building. "Just my luck—no one about," he said. "I'll keep it there, though."

We were on a roof. It was a flat roof on top of a building made of stone. There were a few trees in tubs and they looked like plane trees to me.

"The same law prevails throughout the known universe," said my uncle. "But I should dearly like to see whether they have anything like us."

The recording film made us rather popular with the Press. We gave them Inner Space Reviews and a few close-ups of the very unremarkable houses. They had quite simple lives there. They had not invented the wheel. They seemed to be entirely without machines.

"Inner Space World Not Mechanised," said the papers. And it was concluded that they were a fairly simple set of people, agriculturist and living in small towns. Mind you, we were only focused on one small scene—a roof with fields and houses beyond. We couldn't see any people. Yet.

My uncle sat back and said: "Those dots moving in the field are probably people, but we'll have to wait for a close-up. I only hope they don't turn out to have two heads or nine arms. And if they have armour plating and tentacles I shall be surprised."

The Press had certainly

expanded on the subject, as is their custom. Their best effort was: "Dare Professor X reveal the pictures he gets? Is the answer so terrifying to the human mind that he mercifully withholds information?"

One paper warned its readers that it would keep a detachable page for Inner Space news, so that the children wouldn't be frightened to death.

My uncle was still waiting for a man.

The papers asked whether he could perhaps change the scene. Take other shots. He replied: "My dear Fatheads, this is not a movie camera. It is a microscope. I am not skilled enough to move it. I don't dare touch the thing. If I breathed on it I'd be a million miles away. All I got was one point. And lucky to get that."

At last my uncle revealed that he had seen a creature. A Being On The Roof. That took the papers a fortnight to absorb, just building up the atmosphere. My uncle said it had vaguely the form of a mammal, erect, with prehensile hands. He denied the

account in one paper which said: "Professor says; I don't dare to think of touching the thing."

It is wonderful what can be invented by an enterprising paper. My uncle had been a newspaper man himself, and gave all he could to the air of excitement and thrill. What he knew, he told, in the most absorbing way. He hinted and suggested. He made much out of little.

Because he had only seen the back of an inner-space man, and there was the chance that he might easily get a real surprise if the man turned round.

From the back view, it was as he had said—a mammal with prehensile hands, erect. It was, in fact, a man in a long smock, and he was standing on the roof and eating what might have been a piece of bread.

But of course that was only from the back, and his face might have been anything—if he had a face.

No machines. No wheels. Houses out of the local stone. A bare minimum of comforts. A simple life. A simple

people, living on bread and perhaps fruit. Undeveloped. Not civilised as we know it. They did not even have a wheel. They had yet to evolve out of this rustic roughness. Perhaps they were approaching their industrial revolution, or their earliest discoveries. Fascinating.

"A world unspoilt?" said the papers. The one with the detachable page said that no one could be sure. It might be a post-atomic world. In fact, "Had they forgotten how to build?"

Then my uncle had the good fortune to see the face of his mammal. We looked over the film recording together and I think we both jumped about two inches in the air.

My uncle said: "Wait till the papers get this." He 'phoned the reporter of his old paper and said: "Come over and see what."

Just that. No more. He meant to get the most out of it.

The film showed a blurred outline of a human face. The features were all where they should be. But it seemed hard to place the kind of person

you would describe on earth. You could not say the features were those of a European or of an African, or anything like that.

The papers printed special editions with the man's face on the front. The world of reading people stood still.

It was the face of a young man, but it was not an ordinary face. The hair was silver-fair and the skin almost transparent. The features were, with the economy one would expect of nature in her higher consciousness, where you would expect them, and quite nicely arranged, too.

Yet that portrait of a man shook the world.

Because it had another dimension.

You remember that it was a film we took. That is, we were able to watch it.

In most photographs you get a flat picture. Just as you do in any other view of a person. I mean, you have only to look at a crowd to realise that, with all respect to everyone, people are rather flat to look at. Except the person you fall in love with, or someone you care for

intimately. And then, of course, you see the other thing. The thing that shines out for you personally.

This face had that thing that you break your heart over if you ever saw it in anyone and couldn't hold it.

It was greater than the face of any one man. It held the attributes of woman too. It was rather shocking to realise that here was the face you had been in love with all your life.

But the most shocking thing of all was to turn and look at the man in the train next to you and see the same look in his face too.

Especially when you hated the man next to you in the train and wanted to clear your throat whenever he said anything.

It was that other dimension. That startling knownness. That yourself-within-you that you saw. And to realise that everyone else saw it too.

Actually, if you want my opinion about it, I would say that somewhere, somehow, he was on the wavelength we are all travelling along. Only he had got there.

I suppose there were fewer galaxies of atoms and things to go wrong back there. I don't know.

But it was quite certain that that face had never known evil. "Everyman's Dream," the papers called it. And that was what it was. "The expanding universe," my uncle said, "is not what we think it is. Who knows in what gigantic bloodstream we may dwell. What colossal and yet microcosmic deviations may have made us what we are! The slightest alteration in one molecule and a whole cell-structure may be changed. Who knows?"

Oh, I forgot to tell you that the film simply showed the man turning round to shake some crumbs out of a cloth. I suppose they were for the birds.

Anyway, it was a very ordinary gesture, and it was not even remarkable.

"They haven't invented the wheel—they don't need to," said my uncle. "They don't need any of our inventions because they can travel and communicate mentally just like you'd expect if you were a

child. Only here they can do it. Obviously. If they are as intelligent as that, they won't need our sort of inventions."

"As intelligent as what?" I asked.

"Idiot," he said. "Did you not know that the only people who can dispense with space-crossers such as trains and planes are the lovers and mystics of our ages? All the calculators and physicists in the world can only do it by machinery. It is machinery that man uses instead of the natural power he has outgrown."

Then he went on to say that the real age of man was yet to come . . . That it was not to be a mechanical world that achieved greatness, but the world of mind. That even he had not yet arrived anywhere near the point when he could dispense with material aids.

And he rated number one among the Volitional Intenders. Wrapped in cotton wool and guarded like an emperor.

The power he had was already running down. We should have to wait for it in the third generation.

People would have to get it

for themselves. Even now, they were a little nearer.

My uncle looked at his cabinet. We had a documentary of that world—the tilled fields, the stone houses and the man with his bread.

We had got enough for one lifetime, I suppose, but it was hard to have to wait for his children's children.

You can't make V.I.'s. They just happen out of odd families. Take a mixture of inherited characteristics with the essential background—and, I said essential—of suffering, and consuming love and I don't know what else. But it is the same for all the V.I.'s.

Almost everyone now had a picture of the inner-space man. It was a sort of piece of furniture, part of one's education.

He must have been rather nice to know—only you felt you knew him already. But there wouldn't be any more pictures for a while.

No one had that much power.

My uncle said he would name his successor if he could find one. He kept tuning in

to the V.I's wavelength just in case.

After all, we knew what we wanted; there was no invention or curious creature to look for.

We could wait, and perhaps, one day . . .

But of course that was what happened in the very next generation.

It was bound to happen. Too many people had seen the film to remain unaffected. They felt they had something to look to.

Any day now we should be able to contact our inner spaces again. We are developing one or two V.I's, and also a higher standard of awareness. It is very fascinating.

You remember that I said the papers printed the picture of his face.

But they didn't print it in colour.

They couldn't. We didn't have it in colour.

Our latest pictures of that kind of portrait come out rather well—yes, they do have that sort of face still—alive, radiant, looking-at-you sort of expression. He was just one of them.

Well, after much processing and research, we are doing the pictures, and you soon get used to the idea of silver hair, purple eyes and honey-golden skin.

But this is the interesting thing: the inner world had no green colouring. No chlorophyll. You have to imagine a world which knew only brown and yellow and red and blue—more transparent than anything we have. You also have to imagine living on mushrooms and truffles and brown-leaved corn.

It was a world which lacked one heavy element. And that altered their whole existence.

Imagine a world which had none of one certain metal. I think it was lead they hadn't got. But whatever it was, they were minus something our world has always had. And, apparently, it affected their balance. Or rather it didn't affect it.

The exclusion of one metal prevented a certain pull or bias of their cell forms. They had no rogue viruses or bacteria.

They had no cancer, no strange outlaw cells forming.

Their whole existence was rather like a laboratory set-up, which can only go one way. A chemical composition which has no unknown factor.

The mystery which baffles our experts never existed for them. In other words, they had no interference from any unknown factor. The unpredictable formation of cells in our world did not affect them. They had no slight irregularities of cell structure.

The pull of one element was missing. They did not have to fight it. It had not assembled itself back there. I suppose radio-activity as we know it just had not assumed anything that could affect anything.

To them it would be something that might happen in their outer space beyond their idea of infinity. Given enough of their worlds and universes, some slight deviation might possibly occur, but it hadn't happened to them back there.

After we found that out, we didn't feel quite so badly about our own world. I mean, it wasn't as much our fault as we had always thought.

The V.I's and people approximating to that kind of psychic strength are, as they always have been, immune to many ailments. They have the power of resisting the pull of those deviations in radio-activity.

Our strongest weapon is will-power. But we are up against things which don't exist for our inner space worlds.

That's the way it is. And it may explain a lot.

My uncle gave it as his opinion that there would certainly be very much greater deviations in outer space, and so far, no one has been able to say for certain what will be the result of our space travel. Outer space, I mean.

He says that cause and effect always produce their mutations and you can't hope to guess what the cosmic radiations might produce. "You will note," my uncle remarked, "that this particular world has no chlorophyll and none of a certain metal. The two things may be related."

They were. The absence of green colouring meant that their living plants were not

struggling towards the light, as ours are, but that they were, in fact, deriving only from the soil. Sap rose and fell. There was none of that terrible struggle towards light and differentiation that we have on earth.

The certain elements prevailed and the uncertain radiations did not exist to force life into a series of mutations and pushing for place.

In other words, theirs was a peaceful world. One tree did not have thousands of seeds. The whole picture was one of birth, death and replacement. But not struggle for survival.

The unknown factor, the irregularity of radiations, did not here exist.

Plants did not have to seek in their sun's light the complement to that irregular force which was driving them from the soil, as our plants do.

Everything there derived from whatever will was shaping it.

The latest pictures of the people of inner space show plainly that theirs is a civilisation which could not survive

against any of our radio-active substances.

One of our V.I's noticed that. When I tell you that we evolved a means of communication with an inner-space man by will-condensation and told him of our observations, you will naturally wonder what he said.

The question of a doubtful element had never been put to him before. He considered our discussion and said, by a telepathic message: "We cannot risk the element of doubt on this planet. Were we to reveal to our world or any of its living organisms the slightest doubt, it would react unfavourably on the weakest, and cause a change in metabolism that we could never put right.

"In your own world you have the problem of which came first, the chicken or the egg? We have the answer.

"You have the problem of the origin of disease. We have the answer.

"If you had the answers, you would not have the problems.

"But we had the answers

all along. Because we had not the unknown radiations that you have.

"It was the very uncertainty of Consciousness itself that made your outlaw cells. Life had to feel its way. Here we have no such complexity. There was no ill until Doubt came. When it came, the stress points did not know where to go. They became parasitic on other forms of life. They made lesions in brain cells.

"Your planet fell from perfection. It is not your fault. It is just the result of too many alternatives.

"The fish in your world was forced to adapt a species for dry land. Because it knew the feel of water it had to know more. Its own curiosity forced its mutations. The reptile desired land and some reptiles desired the sky. Their seed were marked accordingly. It was the desire that came first out of Consciousness. Then the egg, then the mutations with their wing possibilities.

"You are now evolving a race of volitional intenders, by your conscious desire. We

can make our own mutations in some of our animals by using our own will. It is always will-power, stress points. Desire.

"The egg—any egg—was made out of condensed will-power, and specialised into whatever might be. If doubt ever came into our world, it would cause mutations which might wreck our life-forms. But, fortunately, such a thing is impossible in our world."

We knew then that they would not be able to stand up to one half of our sort of life.

Their world would be lonely to us. They would be minus our rocky foundations. While we were longing for planes, they would be mentally flying through space.

Telephones for us. Telepathy for them.

We had had to overcome more than they ever dreamed of; they had never had to overcome. They just went straight on.

We asked them what happened when an irresistible force met an immovable object. They said that was easy. The irresistible force went

clean through the immovable object at a higher frequency.

And that was that. They said everything had an answer in their world. We learned quite a lot from them.

The newspapers printed a lot of it. My uncle kept it going for a long time until we had learnt all we could.

It was later that we learnt of the outer-space people. By the way, it was rather curious that we never had any talks with the inner-space women. We heard a lot from the golden beauties of outer Del-taroid and the Island Meteors, and from the Matriarchy of Efsilond, but from inner space not a word.

It was because the inner worlds had to protect their progeny from the dangers that might arise were there to be any change in their more delicate sense mechanism. They were kept safe from any knowledge of our chancy world.

After all, as my uncle said, it must be rather a shock to find that you were living on a part of a speck of stress point.

My uncle said it only went

to show how very careful you had to be.

He himself would never think of telling his own wife if he ever found out that he was in communication with a world the size of infinity—as good as — or that this world was chock-full of doubt-lesions that could give you worse than headaches.

When my uncle first launched on his research, people had said that, of course, you couldn't have a whole unit outside of a split stress point. That anyone knew that you couldn't have any whole thing less than a molecule.

He replied that he was already getting it, and there was no such size as we imagined.

You could have anything in this universe. The inner-space worlds had their atoms too.

But when he had retired and could read at his leisure, he was delighted to find that the same set-up prevailed in outer space.

They in turn could not believe that anything so utterly infinitesimal as our

universe could possibly contain even the slightest trace of a consciousness.

And our inability to create matter at will seemed to them to place us among the non-living substances. Almost.

But that was back in the fiftieth century.

Notes on the V.I. Plastic Lens.

This method of magnifying invisible objects was adopted in order to overcome the problem of light-wave and electron-wave limitations. The light-waves and electron-waves would, of course, pass round any object smaller than a stress point of an electron.

It was found that thought-wave radiations could be much shorter than electron-waves.

Distance no object. This power of penetration was directed on to an object, invisible but assumed. It had to be reflected through a series of jet-propelled plastic lenses and so on to a sensitised plate.

It was much the same as an ordinary micro-projector, but worked by the V.I. instead of by light-rays.

The plastic lenses were rotated at unimaginable speed. My uncle found that he could condense and magnify the thought waves. When the latter were focused on the special radio-active screen, the resulting photograph was magnified billions of times, so that we could see the details I have described.

M.D.

THE PHOENIX NEST

is the title of our lead story next month, written by Richard de Mille, son of Cecil B. de Mille, the film magnate. Charles Eric Maine comes back to our pages with a splendid story, *The Boogie Matrix*, ably supported by Frank Quattrocchi's *Kid's Game*, J. F. Burke's *The Censors*, E. Everett Evans' *Fly by Night* and Katherine Marcuse's *21st Century Mother*. Plus, of course, the usual features.

AUTHENTIC — A MONTHLY MUST!

ESP

This article on extrasensory perception is the third in our series dealing with matters of recurring interest in Science Fiction.

The power of mind over matter has taken up the time and effort of intelligent men for centuries. Yet still there is no general agreement on the reality of ESP. Of course, no one newly in love will doubt that mind can speak to mind—and experiments at Duke University, North Carolina, have seemed to confirm this romantic idea, though only with such prosaic affairs as designs on cards. Maybe the researchers would get positive results more consistently if they used lovers as subjects; or maybe that would be considered too objective a technique!

And telepathy is only one branch or aspect of ESP. It is one that most people believe they have experienced at one time or another, and it has become a common constituent of ordinary conversation. Other parts of ESP are telekinesis, chronportation, clairvoyance and, to invent a word, transmondation.

Telekinesis is the phenomenon of remote control of objects, with no intervening connections. The telekinetic subject is able to manipulate things just by thinking about them; he can open doors, close windows, move books and papers around—

all without touching any of these things. Or such is the claim.

Chronportation means movement through time by unordinary methods. It is a kind of extension of telekinesis in which objects and people are moved, not so much in the space of here and now, but in time to then and there. People who claim to have this ability claim also that they can think themselves backwards and forwards in time—within a range whose limits vary with the powers of the investigator.

Clairvoyance literally means clear seeing, but has come to denote the phenomenon of being visually aware of real events in the future. The subject doesn't actually go forward in time; he merely "sees" things happening tomorrow or next year. His prophecies are confirmed when the time flow catches up with what he saw.

Transmondation is something rather different and more enterprising than the ESP aspects we have mentioned. It is the phenomenon of passing to and fro between duplicate worlds. In a sense, the spiritualists are involved in this when they contact the spirits of the dead on what they call an astral plane. With less emphasis on

the religious factors, others have claimed to have contacted intelligences of other worlds similar in many respects to our own. These other worlds are often said to be in a different state of vibration from ours and they possess a concrete reality of their own.

For the person of scientific predilections, this is all very difficult. Classical science has always been concerned, in the last analysis, with measurement of phenomena—and ESP phenomena are difficult or impossible to measure. The Duke University experiments have given some empirical figures, but they do not mean very much to the non-statistician. No one has yet found a way to subject these phenomena to the ordinary techniques of science so that methods and results will fall into line with standard practice. But why should we expect there to be such a way?

A good many intelligent people who have not been made to think in grooves by classical scientific education believe that ESP phenomena lie in a range that is not approachable by test-tubes and cathode ray tubes. This, they say, is an affair of the mind, and the mind alone can get to grips with it. The main difficulty about this approach is that it is not very impressive to the orthodox scientist—whose opinion is very important to the public acceptance of ideas.

So let us look at arguments that have been adduced to interpret ESP in terms of the usual physical laws. To begin with, the detection of electrical waves in the brain and their measurement by the electroencephalograph was a heaven-sent piece of evidence for the possibility of mental phenomena, not being limited to the confines of the skull. The reasoning went that if you could pick up these impulses with crude electrodes, surely you could do the same with the delicate machinery of another mind. It seemed that here was a physical basis for telepathy. For the moment the tremendous amplification needed to make the brain-waves apparent was ignored.

The stage seemed set. It was common knowledge that you could do all kinds of things remotely with electromagnetic waves—why, there was nothing difficult about making them open garage doors or detect the entrance of a burglar or, some time later, tell you where and when the enemy planes were taking off a thousand miles away. What aeriads can do, surely the brain can do better. So telekinesis was rationalised.

But of course this was false induction. Brainwaves might explain telepathy, because two receptive-transmissive components were involved. But telekinesis is a very different thing, in that the object

worked upon is, as far as we know, quite inanimate and non-receptive. There is nothing in a garage door *per se* that will allow it to respond to any kind of a stimulus. Electromagnetic waves will control the flight of an aeroplane only if receiving gear is installed in the plane. Brainwaves alone *may* beat back and forth like radar beams and *may* be able to contact another source of similar waves, but there is no way for them to effect motion in inanimate objects.

Also, there is evidence, as mentioned in the previous article in this series, that brainwaves are not so much the consequence of thought as of involuntary searching, scanning for things to think about. But this applies only to the larger, cruder waveforms and may not be true for the, so far, unanalysable smaller components of electroencephalograms.

There is nothing similar to brainwaves that will serve as a basis for a physical explanation of chronportation, clairvoyance and transmutation. But there are theoretical possibilities, completely postulatory. These are based on the fact that no one knows what time is, or even if it *is*. There is a concept that time is merely something we hypothesise to explain the limitations of our awareness; to give us a scale on which we can mark off certain stages in our consciousness.

A corollary to this idea is that all events are instantaneous or co-existent and that it is the paucity of our perceptivity that makes us give them a sequential character. At times, it is said, in sleep for example, we overcome this paucity and catch glimpses of the wider, more complete panorama of reality—we see the future, we move into the future merely, so to speak, by opening our eyes a little wider. From this point of view a time machine would simply be a device for extending our perceptive powers and no physical movement would necessarily be involved.

Physical movement is not even necessary for an explanation of transmutation according to the no-time theory. Our world, our universe, is a set of coexistent phenomena in a certain state of molecular excitation or vibration. All the physical properties of things, all the natural laws are consequences of this particular plane of vibration and we are aware of things only because our sense system is responsive to this vibration. It is postulated that other planes of vibration exist—possibly in the same time and space as our own—and that we have within us, or some of us have, sense systems that will respond to the alien vibratory phenomena; we become aware of other worlds.

As an analogy, is cited the fact that our eyes are sensitive visually to

only a very small range of electromagnetic radiations; we cannot see radio waves or X-rays, even though these are physically similar to visible light in all respects but wavelength. So it may be that our collective sense systems are not normally stimulated by vibratory planes other than our own, even though one or many such alien planes may exist and be made apparent to a few people whose sense systems are slightly skewed.

True it would be that anyone who had experienced the reality of another world would find it difficult not to talk about it—true, too, that mundane-minded listeners would tend to believe that the skewness was not limited to the mystic's sense system. It is quite likely that such people would be placed under lock and key, and a

number of science fiction stories have been based on that possibility.

This narrow outlook tends to push psychic researchers and ESP investigators into a corner where they huddle together as a clique, ashamed, afraid to communicate their results to the outside world. It is at present not a social advantage to claim to possess telekinetic or clairvoyant powers. You could lose your job, your wife, your freedom. But there are signs that some scientists are preparing to be scientific about all this.

Let us hope that it doesn't take too long, for there can be little doubt that proof of the reality of ESP could have greater effects on the future of humanity than even atomic power. There would be no need for power of any kind.

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For You, The Possessed

by
J.F. BURKE

Sometimes an author just has to write a particular story. This is such a one...

★

This is one story I swore I would never write. No matter how hard-up I might be for ideas, I swore to myself that I'd never fall back on this worn-out theme. It's been used so often. Somebody is always finding some new twist, or making an old twist look like a new one. But here was one writer who wasn't going to be so unimaginative.†

And yet here I am, sitting down to write it. Here it is, a story about

Illustrated by Muller

the last man on Earth. Old stuff? Of course. Only, the awful part of it is that this time it's a true story. I think I'm the last man alive.

In that case, who is going to read the tale when I've finished it?

You are. You, who have bought this magazine. You will read it, and of course you won't believe a word of it. You're a science-fiction fan, and anyone who says that science-fiction fans are a credulous, open-mouthed lot is making a big mistake: they're the most cynical bunch in creation; they've read so much about Martians and ray guns and space warps that they don't believe a darned thing at the end of it all. So you won't pay any attention to what you read here.

Why am I writing it, then?

I'm writing it because writing is my business, and I've still got to live, and it comes natural to me to put words down on paper. Even

on a desert island I suppose I'd keep scribbling. And also I'm writing it because I'm not sure. Not absolutely sure. There's just a chance that I'm not the last man alive; maybe, among all of you who will read this—you, the possessed, the not truly living—there will be someone else like myself, who *knows*. I'd like to make contact with him, if there's time. This is a last S.O.S., you might say. Because once it has appeared in print, I'll have to expect the worst. One of the Watchers will learn about this story. I'm hoping against hope that someone else will see it first and try to get in touch with me. But in my heart of hearts I know I'm taking a mad risk, and that the Watchers will get me first.

You see, the Martians are here.

It's not a joke. It's not a smart way of grabbing your attention so that you'll go on reading this story. You've read about Martians

before, and you've talked plenty about them. And now they're here. I tell you that they're here, in possession of you.

But not yet in possession of me. I'm the last real man on Earth—the last independent, free-minded man alive.

It's all right; I know you won't believe a word of it. You won't believe it, any more than you'd believe it if I told you that a month ago the Prime Minister of England was a man called Braithwaite.

Yes, Braithwaite. Not Reed, as you'll want to insist. Reed has been P.M. for two years, you'll tell me. There never was a man called Braithwaite.

You've forgotten Braithwaite. You were meant to forget. He was eliminated, and all memory of him has been eliminated, so that the evil game might go on.

Shall I tell you all about it? It might entertain you for a few minutes. And if it makes just one or two of you uneasy, if perhaps it strikes

a chord somewhere . . . well, that might be the dawn of realisation and of eventual liberation; it might mean that there is still hope.

Braithwaite was Prime Minister a month ago when I returned to this country. I wasn't feeling too good. I must have been mad to think I could go into Tibet on my own and come out with a book about the place, but when I started it seemed a splendid idea. The current regime there had cracked up, and it was said that the re-establishment of a very much severer form of the old quasi-religious administration was having some interesting effects. I saw myself as another Peter Fleming, or even as a super-Fawcett—only I was going to come back. I was going to write a wonderful book.

I was lucky to get back. Something very strange happened to me up there on the roof of the world. For three weeks, in a monastery

into which I had stumbled, half dead with cold, I lay in something like a cataleptic trance. They told me I ceased to breathe, but somehow they knew I was not dead. I was treated with great respect. For three weeks I had lived in a state of suspended animation. It was all very strange, yet it seemed less strange at the time than it did later. Up in that incredible lost world, almost anything seems possible.

Anyway, I got back. And the day after my return, Braithwaite made that famous speech of his in the House.

But I'm forgetting. I can't call it famous, because none of you now remember having heard of it.

The evening papers had screamer headlines. Men and women on their way home from work exchanged wild speculations. The general consensus of opinion was that the P.M. had gone mad.

"It has come to my knowledge," he had said, "that the whole human race is

gravely threatened by an insidious enemy. It will be hard for you to understand what I have to say, but I do most earnestly implore you to treat it with every seriousness. We are threatened by beings from another planet. The Martians are already in our midst."

There was a buzz of consternation on the Government benches, and a series of ribald cheers from the Opposition.

Braithwaite was pale, but he went on: "This is no military invasion of the sort we have been led to expect by lurid fiction and films. It is a treacherous invasion from within. We are caught up in a cosmic conflict, and we are in imminent danger. I want to explain to you . . ."

Several members of his own party were trying to persuade him to sit down. A rising murmur drowned his words. But he would not be subdued.

"I will not be stopped!" he cried. "You must listen to me. These evil essences

from another planet are enslaving the minds of all the human beings on our world, without their presence being detected. There is no time to lose. I have proof of what I say."

The newspaper accounts were conflicting from then on. The two evening papers that I saw had very different stories. One said that Braithwaite had given a masterly exposition of the Eurasian Federation's attempt to impose hypnotic thought control on the members of the free nations of the world, and went on to say that it was a pity he had chosen to cast his warning in the form of an allegory; the other paper, which had a strong Opposition bias, maintained that the Prime Minister had shown himself to be far too old for his position, and had raved incoherently about fairies and gremlins which fluttered about the caverns of his mind where thoughts of international friendship and resistance towards American

economic domination ought to have had prime place.

I wish I could remember more of the exact wording of the speech. But neither of the papers printed it in full—each chose only the extracts it needed.

Later that night a broadcast news bulletin said that the Prime Minister regretted the uncomprehending reception that his words had been given, and that he would issue a full statement the following morning. It was also hinted that he might broadcast, but there was some question of his seeing his doctor before coming to a final decision.

"Two doctors is what he wants!" said one of the regulars in my local pub. "Get him put away, quick, 'fore he does any damage."

Braithwaite was put away all right. But not by any known human method.

When I awoke the next morning and went downstairs for the paper, I naturally expected further details. But

there was no mention on the front page of the incident in the House. I looked quickly through the other pages, but came across no reference. It was odd. Perhaps, though, the Press was being very wary. It was unusual, but there was a possibility that someone in authority had asked for great discretion to be shown—perhaps until after the doctors had seen the P.M. and issued a statement.

Yet, even at the time, that seemed improbable to me. And when there was nothing on the front page of the evening paper, I couldn't help saying to the man sitting opposite me in the compartment as we came down from London Bridge:

"They're keeping very quiet about Braithwaite, aren't they?"

"Who?"

"Braithwaite," I said. "The P.M."

He stared. "You mean the Prime Minister?"

"That's right."

"But Reed is Prime Minister. Has been for two years."

I thought he must be mad. And it was plain that he thought I must be mad.

And the trouble was that he had more grounds for his belief than I had for mine. Because there was a report in one of the morning papers that I had not seen, of a few remarks that had been made at a luncheon yesterday by the Rt. Hon. Ferguson Reed. And in the lunch-time editions there was a report of his views on the recent Anglo-American talks, and the intimation that he would be addressing the House on that subject later in the day.

Nobody had ever heard of Braithwaite. Braithwaite had never existed.

It wasn't a pleasant sensation, this feeling that I was the only sane man in the country — perhaps in the world. It was incredible that everyone should have forgotten the Prime Minister. Who was this Reed? I had

never heard of him. I was foolish enough to start a discussion with someone in a restaurant, and he looked quite frightened. I said that I thought there must be a great hoax on. It could easily be overthrown, I said, by anyone who cared to consult the evening papers for the previous day.

In due course, just to prove to myself that I wasn't cracking up, I turned up the files and went through all the evening papers that I knew had been full of Braithwaite's speech.

There was no mention of him. No mention of anyone called Braithwaite; and no mention of Martians.

I began now to have serious doubts about my sanity. Perhaps that queer spell in Tibet hadn't done me any good. I couldn't seriously regard myself as the only man in the squad who was in step. The fault must be mine. I ought to see a doctor.

Fortunately I didn't take such a step at once. I went on

looking through the newspapers for a few days in the hope of finding some rational explanation—just as a dangerously sick man goes on searching for excuses not to face up to the worst, pretending that he needn't see the doctor yet, that everything is going to be all right. If it hadn't been for this obstinacy of mine, I might not have stumbled on that advertisement in the personal column of *The Times*.

"Braithwaite," was all it said. "Anybody interested please write Box No. 272."

I wrote, giving my name and address. The notice had been so non-committal that I sensed it was best to be careful and not give too much away yet. I merely said that I remembered Braithwaite and would like news of him, and that Reed puzzled me.

Two days later, in the middle of the afternoon, I was trying to write an article on which I simply couldn't concentrate, when there was a ring at the bell. My housekeeper was

out. I went downstairs, and found a tall, middle-aged man with grey hair on the doorstep.

He nodded when he saw me. "I recognise you," he said in a quiet, reflective voice, "from a photograph I saw some months ago. I've come about Braithwaite." He did not exactly look furtively over his shoulder, but I got the impression that he was waiting, was keyed-up for something to happen—something to pounce.

We went inside.

"Who is Reed?" I asked, point-blank.

He shrugged. "Reed is . . . Reed. A creation. A human being, like any other. But of course he didn't exist a few days ago. And yet he's not aware of that, and nobody else is aware of it."

"Except we two?"

"We two. There may be others. But I'm not optimistic about that. Yours is the only reply I've had, and I put that advertisement in immediately after Braithwaite ceased to be."

"Where is Braithwaite now?"

"I wouldn't like to say where he is on a metaphysical plane," said my visitor, sombrely. "But as far as our own language goes, all I can say is that he isn't anywhere. He doesn't exist, and things have been so arranged that he never did exist."

I licked my lips. I said: "You'll have to talk more plainly than that. It doesn't make sense."

"Does anything make sense any more?" His eyes were tortured, haunted. He went on: "But we've got to work on some assumptions, haven't we? We've got to believe that what was true a week ago is true today—that our memories haven't played us false, whatever the evidence may be. And you'd better hear the whole story, if I can tell it to you clearly. I still don't grasp a lot of it—and what I do grasp scares me to death." He stared at

me for a moment, then shook his head slowly. "I wonder..."

"What is it?"

He seemed to make up his mind. "Try to sponge your mind clear of ordinary thoughts," he said with surprising briskness. "Let yourself relax. If they are really there—if they want you to know the truth—now's their chance."

"Who are 'they'?"

"Close your eyes," he said. "And think of the night sky. Think of yourself sprawled out against the stars. And when you feel the message coming, don't grab at it—relax, and let it come."

Maybe we were both mad. I wasn't sure that I didn't prefer people who had forgotten Braithwaite, rather than this wide-eyed crank. But there was an intensity in his manner that could not be resisted. I sat back and closed my eyes. In the distance I heard a 'bus grinding up a hill. Somewhere a radio chattered away, and in the back garden the birds

sang. Everything was normal—the world was sane and orderly enough; what was I doing, getting myself into a state of mind like this?

Then I had the first intimations of a strange, distorted vision. It was faint and unstable, fading, incongruously like poor reception on a TV screen. When I instinctively tried to concentrate on it, it blurred; but when I let my mind go, surrendering myself, the outlines were clarified, though still the conception was beyond the grasp of my human mind.

Two depersonalised, yet somehow intensely individualistic, forces sprawled across the galaxies like giants who used the solar systems as their playthings. Forces of good and evil? Yes, I thought—and then, no. Perhaps not. I could not be sure. Just opposing forces . . . and one of them steadily gaining the upper hand. There was no doubt that one of them was winning, at any rate in *our* part of the galaxy. And this

one that was winning was the one, I sensed, that had hitherto been regarded as an enemy—the one whose forces had contradicted the whole essence of our being, even the whole physical structure of our universe.

I grasped at truths beyond my understanding. I saw, fleetingly, a vision of the cosmos in which we living creatures were no more than the tiniest cells, or fragments of cells, in a suprahuman body. Or perhaps two bodies—two bodies forever at war. We were part of a colossal psychophysical organism—an organism infected. The power of The Watchers was spreading over this part of the cosmos. The Watchers . . . somehow a plural manifestation of the individual force that opposed our own scheme of things.

And who was striving against The Watchers? The message came to me from a great distance, murmuring weakly across millions of light years. Somewhere The

Others were in the ascendancy. But here their strength was too feeble—their influence was not powerful enough to withstand the infiltration of that disruptive, unnatural force that was bent on warping and re-fashioning our existence.

The outer planets had succumbed. Like a virulent disease, the influence of The Watchers crept in and out of our solar system. It reached round us to Mars. The Martians, frail disembodied intelligences that had existed, I now learned, in a state almost of suspension for generations, succumbed, and by succumbing were strengthened. Those bodiless entities acquired a new individual personality, and at the same time were possessed by a spiritual hunger—literally an insatiable greed.

I saw them, absurdly, as venomous fireflies, somehow projecting themselves across interplanetary space, seeking the assuagement of their indescribable hunger. Driven on by the calculating Watchers,

they descended on Earth like a cloud of unseen parasites.

The Martians are here!

Like the virus of poliomyelitis, freezing and paralyzing, cutting communications, the Martians have taken possession of the minds of people on Earth. And behind the Martians is the more appalling strength of The Watchers—The Watchers who are now omnipresent, capable of twisting reality to suit their purposes, capable of obliterating history—so that what they obliterated did not exist, and had never existed.

I groped for a clearer understanding, and was baffled. I was conscious only of a terrible weight bearing down upon the world, and of only the faintest message of hope and reassurance coming from so far away—a message that said *Courage*, and *The end is not yet—we are not defeated*.

But hopefulness was blotted out by a vision of Armageddon; and beyond it, a flux of horror from which

arose strange new creatures, living in a pattern that seemed twisted and perverse, utterly alien and unintelligible to me.

I opened my eyes. The man sitting opposite nodded gravely.

"You have seen?"

"Yes," I said. "I've been shown what is happening." I studied him. "What's your name? Who are you?"

"Richardson," he said. "I'm only another man like yourself. Just as terrified as you are. I know no more than you did—or than Braithwaite did. And we haven't the important position in the country that Braithwaite had."

"Not that his power and position did any good," I commented.

"No."

"But how have we escaped? Why are we still free?"

He shook his head. "In any battle, there must always be the last ones to go. We are the—well, the rearguard, I suppose you could call us. We are the last channels of

influence for The Others. I had a vague feeling that they exerted themselves to keep some last channel open. Perhaps they mean to use us, if they can summon up the strength."

I said: "We're the healthy corpuscles fighting a disease in the bloodstream of our limb of creation."

"You could put it that way, I imagine. But when the disease is infinitely stronger than the few remaining healthy cells, what usually happens?"

We were silent for a long time, possessed by a sense of futility. What were we supposed to do?

At last Richardson said: "I have an idea that the only way to fight back is to concentrate on the destruction of the illusion that The Watchers have created. I don't believe—I simply won't let myself believe—that the past can be falsified. Even if all the records are destroyed or altered, and even if new human beings are created with memories of a life that they have never

lived—beings like Reed—I still feel there must be a way of smashing that illusion and letting the truth come surging back."

"I hope you're right," I said, wryly. Then I added: "I can't help thinking how crazy it would be if we were wrong. I mean, looking at it as dispassionately as possible, ought we to assume, simply because The Watchers have different views from those we have been accustomed to, that they are wicked?"

"Don't let yourself think like that," snapped Richardson. "Don't give way to the dangers of the open mind. Remember that Braithwaite was obliterated, and that was—was——"

"Undemocratic?" I said.

We grinned. It sounded absurd. One has come to be self-conscious about words like "democracy" and "freedom" nowadays.

"I must go now," said Richardson, getting up. "I want to follow up my line of thought. And before I start

work in earnest, I want to go into old libraries and consult some records. There are one or two people I want to talk to—very carefully. I want to find out just how thorough The Watchers have been.” We shook hands, and before he went he said: “We must be very careful. The channel must be kept open—we’re the last outpost in this solar system. We must keep in close touch. I’ll see you on Friday. In case anything goes wrong, or in case you need to contact me, I’ll give you my address.”

He gave me a card with an address in Hampstead printed on it, and we parted.

I went on living—eating, sleeping, breathing, and going to and fro. People I had always known spoke to me in their usual way. Trains ran, ’buses choked the streets, cinemas showed their expected programmes. There were still newsreels, and there were still newspapers. But I could not read the newspapers with any confidence. I felt a sort of

giddiness—a vertigo of disbelief, like someone in a dream who tries to read a page of print and can never get the words into focus, or who cannot make sense out of any consecutive sentence.

It seemed to me that Richardson and I would have to do something positive. We could not merely sit and wait. Somewhere there must be a blow we could strike; somehow we must be able to start chipping away at the unsound foundations of this edifice of illusion.

On Friday I waited for him all morning, and all afternoon. He did not come. In the early evening I went out to Hampstead, apprehensive.

Richardson opened the door to me. There was no light of recognition in his eyes.

I said: “I was wondering if anything had gone wrong. What happened to you?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“You were going to come and see me today. Did you make any progress in your

research—did you find any good leads?"

He stared. "I'm afraid there must be some mistake," he said coldly. "You must be confusing me with somebody else."

I went cold with fear. But perhaps he was being watched. Perhaps he dare not speak out. I got his card from my pocket and showed it to him. "This is yours, isn't it?"

For a moment I had an awful suspicion that the card might have been altered—perhaps there would be a different name on it.

But it had Richardson's name and address all right.

He peered at it. "That is my card," he agreed, "but I've no idea how you came to be in possession of it."

"You know perfectly well you gave it to me," I said desperately. "We were going to meet today. You were going to follow up your idea about breaking down the illusion of Reed, and re-establishing the true reality.

Don't you remember? Braithwaite . . ."

He glanced quickly down the street as though to call a policeman. He said in a level, soothing tone: "I'm afraid that the only Reed I know of is the Prime Minister, and I don't move in exalted enough circles to know him personally. And I've never heard of anybody called Braithwaite."

He meant it. There was no flicker of complicity in his face. He was already closing the door, and I had no doubt he intended to telephone the police.

I turned and walked quickly away. It was all I could do not to run.

So now I am alone. If anybody else ever answered Richardson's advertisement in *The Times*, he will certainly not tell me. Perhaps that advertisement has ceased to exist—it may, for all I know, have been obliterated. I haven't the heart to look.

What am I to do now? The idea of putting up a

desperate last stand against hopeless odds seems very fine and noble, but it's not as simple as all that. I don't know where to begin the fight. I realise now how Braithwaite must have felt—I understand what anguish seized him at the thought of his impotence, so that he wildly got up in the House and tried to shout his news to the world in the hope that someone would hear and understand, so that something could be done before it was too late. But by then it was already too late. He must have known that—indeed, he would hardly have done anything so fruitless if he had believed there was any real hope.

If Braithwaite was powerless, what use am I? Nobody would listen to me. Nobody would report me on the front page of the newspapers. And if they did, on the following morning I and those newspapers would have ceased to exist—another reality would have been substituted for us.

There is nothing to do,

apparently, but wait. Wait and hope for a glimmer of light—for some message from The Others, when they know what they wish to do. Waiting will be difficult. I hope I don't go mad. To sit here knowing that I am the last man on Earth . . .

It is late. The world outside is dark, and the world inside my head seems to darken. I have a terrible pain in my head. I have thought too much, and faced too great a problem.

And it's silly, when you come to think of it. I'm only one human being among millions, living on a speck of matter in infinity. No one would expect me to carry on a crusade single-handed. Even if you could call it a crusade. One ought not to form judgments too hastily. The more I think of it, the more I realise that one should adapt oneself to the circumstances of life and not be automatically hostile to new ideas. Half the troubles of our past have been due to stubborn con-

servatism and the clinging to out-moded ideas of morality and science. You've only got to think of the unenlightened opposition that Reed, the Prime Minister, encountered four years ago when he pushed for the development of disease warfare weapons. I see that yesterday he hinted it might be a good thing to make arrangements for setting up bacteriological warfare posts long the borders of the Eurasian Federation countries—purely for defensive purposes, of course, and with adequate safeguards.

It may be that we need some new force in our decadent society. I don't know what it will be, but something—some power over and above ourselves—will have to grasp

and re-shape our whole creation. All the old ideas, the weary misconceptions of our dull past, will have to be swept away. We must have the courage to face up to change.

Reading back over what I've written, I'm amused. This wasn't a bad idea for a short story at all, was it? I wonder how the idea came to me? When I look at Braithwaite's name on paper I seem to hear a sort of echo; but it gets fainter and fainter. I suppose I must once have known somebody called Braithwaite, and the name stuck in my head.

The genesis of a short story is often hard to trace. And when you start, you often don't know how it will end up.

CUCKOO

by
MARTIN JORDAN



Illustrated by Davis

There's more than one way of clearing out a nest, and sometimes more than one cuckoo does it.

THE star-ship *Dædalus*, homing from Vega IV, had radioed its presence whilst still a light fortnight off the orbit of Pluto. By the time it landed at Port Atlantic a crowd of some thousands had collected. The Vega mission had been the biggest ever; if *Dædalus* had made it, her crew would be the most travelled representatives of the human race.

The ship had materialised out of hyperspace on the frontier of the solar system; from thence the Drive had been exchanged for chemical jets, but velocity had finally been killed by the Blumer Field. The ship was sucked gently out of the sky by the magnetic maw of the spaceport; it came to rest with the gigantic deliberation of an ancient zeppelin.

It was a clear day, hard and blue. The crowd, kept at fifty paces' distance by the port police, gazed at the metal plates that had crossed the gulf. Nothing happened for some time. Then a sigh of interest as loud as a thunder-clap greeted a groundcar that

shot through the crowd from the direction of Adcenter and stopped in front of the stern lock. A deafening cheer broke out as the lock opened to reveal a figure in service grey and silver. The roar of welcome was continuous as the figure stepped into the groundcar, to be greeted by its sole occupant and whisked away.

The lock closed. The man in grey and silver did not look at the crowd but stared straight ahead unsmiling. Some noticed his eyes. They were deeply sunk and blood-shot, and the face drew no animation from them; the man seemed to be bearing something heavy in the line of emotion.

Outside Adcenter, Cyrus J. Webster, the star-ship's captain, got out of the groundcar with his companion, General Vogler. Cutting through the respectful worship of the crowd, the pair made grimly for the entrance and were snatched upward by the elevator.

"Now, Cee . . ." They were

alone in deep chairs, and the captain was gulping a double rye. "We got your signal. Sorry about the crowds. You said 'no welcome,' but we decided to prevent a riot by letting the people in; otherwise it would have meant bloodshed. Did you make it?"

Webster passed a hand across his forehead. He said: "Yes, we made it."

"Vega IV?"

"Vega IV."

"Well, come on! Earth-type? Life-forms?"

The captain gave the general his curiously pain-dulled look.

"Yes, an earth-type planet. Sidereal period, point-seven-five earth-years. Orbital velocity, one-seven-point-six miles per second. Rotation period, twenty earth-hours, three minutes and some seconds. Density, seven-point-two water. Mean radius, four thousand one hundred odd miles. Mass, point-nine earth. Atmosphere, earth-type . . . high oxygen content . . ."

His voice faltered. He added: "Life forms—humanoid."

"Humanoid?" The general was startled.

"Gimme another rye," Webster said.

"Tell me. Take your time."

Webster clutched the full glass the other gave him. He muttered: "Humanoid. That's not right. *Human*—that's worse. No word with 'human' in it will do." His eyes seemed to plead with Vogler's. "Hell! Worse than . . . imagination."

Vogler waited with his hands on his knees. After a long minute Webster drained the whiskey.

"Six casualties, by the way," he said. "Three officers, two techs and a civilian psycho."

"Aggression?"

"Suicide."

"The *psycho* committed suicide?"

Webster's lips smiled. "An interesting discovery—that a prolonged brush with evil can drive a rabid Freudian to suicide. Of course, Mattock believed civilisation to be built on man's inhibitions. He knew what the uninhibited *psi* is like—theoretically. But actual contact with it killed him."

The general said nothing.

"A hundred and forty-four

officers and men," Webster went on, nodding at the wall in the direction of the ship. "And all in need of psychiatry."

"You mean . . .?"

"Will you give the de-shipping order? Get 'em right off that ship into the nearest psych-ward?"

The general opened his mouth to speak; closed it again and flipped the intercom instead. While he was giving his instructions, Webster finished his third whiskey. When the general cut contact and turned again to Webster, he started. Webster was asleep.

Five minutes later, Webster woke up. He said: "Sorry. That was the reaction to a sudden handing-over of responsibility. I'll tell you about . . ."

"Look, if you want to rest first——"

"No, listen. I said the life we found was humanoid. They're *people*. They look exactly like *us*—Western Earth-type—Smiths, Joneses and Robinsons. Some of the males brilliantine their hair.

The women use lipstick. Know your Milton?"

"M-milton?" the general stammered.

"*Paradise Lost*. You know, Milton's Satan uttered the most terrible words ever to be printed. '*EVIL, BE THOU MY GOOD!*'"

"H'm," the general said.

"Know what? That's the guiding principle of Vega IV."

"In what way?"

"Take us earthmen. We've creepy-crawly things in our unconscious, haven't we? We go to psychoanalysts to have them rooted out. When that's done we find them far too nasty to exist in consciousness. We know them for what they are, and we're cured."

"Well?"

"These Vegans also have things crawling in their unconscious. They get rid of them the same way. Only those things are *virtues!*"

The general stared.

"Toleration—kindness—honesty!" Webster grinned. "Unspeakable atavisms like those! They pay their psychos to ferret them out . . ."

"For God's sake!" Vögler

breathed. "What sort of people . . ."

"People," Webster said, "whose idea of light entertainment is to watch a live baby being roasted slowly . . . People whose sex-habits would have made Nero a saint, whose politics would have frightened the Carthaginians! People with the social sense of old-time gangsters and the ethics of criminal lunatics!"

Vogler sat back in his chair. "Did they . . . what sort of a reception . . ."

"They put us in jail. Each man separately. They probed us with their psi-tests. Then they let us go."

"But that's incredible! If they're as bad as you say, why should they——"

"You tell *me*," Webster shrugged. "They let us loose and allowed us to take off. The suicides happened on the way back."

"What *really* killed those men?"

"I told you," Webster answered wearily. "The experience of being brought face to face with evil."

"Almost . . . unbelievable."

"We landed in a savannah-

like agricultural place. There were slaves chained together. The overseers took us to a hut. They wished to do us honour. They took dozens of live rodent-type animals and . . ."

"Go on."

". . . Gouged out the creatures' eyes for us!" Webster said, savagely. "A great delicacy! And then they started to torture a slave. That was for our entertainment! We attacked them, but they were too many. They overpowered us and took us to a city . . ."

"They have cities?"

"Cities founded on such horror that . . ."

"That what?"

"That I can't talk about it."

Webster shrugged.

Vogler watched him; noted that he was shaking. He said, gently: "Tell me about the social mores. Talk in generalities."

"Of course, we'd a sociologist aboard. He was a fat man, and now he's thin. Those people aren't up to our technical level. They're at the stage of the internal combustion engine and crude

atomic fission. Their social set-up is despotism . . ."

The intercom buzzed. Vogler listened, and told Webster: "They're taking off your crew. The crowd's cheering itself hoarse."

". . . Despotism based on psychology," Webster went on. "They're technologically backward, but only in engineering and gadgetry. Their mental powers are almost infinitely ahead of ours. They don't really need the gadgetry."

"I don't understand."

"They've telepathy, advanced hypnosis—including memory obliteration—and such sheer virtuosity in propaganda and all the manipulatory brain-techniques that . . . *nothing* is beyond them."

"Such as?"

"Well, they could have put us to sleep and extracted from our minds the full technology of the Drive."

"And did they?"

"They put us to sleep."

The general looked sickly. "Do you think——"

"I don't know," Webster muttered.

Again the intercom buzzed.

Vogler brought in a face to the visor screen.

"It's your number one," he said.

The number one was named Spangler. He stared with anxious eyes out of the screen and called: "Captain Webster, sir! *There was a stow-away aboard!* I'm afraid he's escaped into the crowd!"

"What?"

Webster leapt up and rushed to the elevator. The general followed. At the Adcenter entrance they saw the starship and the warm-pressing throng.

"There's not a second to be lost!" Webster urged. "Throw a cordon round the port. Not a man, woman or child must leave the area!"

Two weeks later a meeting was in progress in the conference room at Adcenter. Round the table sat twelve men—Vogler, Webster and a group of military and civilian experts. The room contained a window occupying the whole of one wall—a window which opened upon the port.

The condition of that area would have surprised a new-

comer. Normally a chequer-board of berths and exhaust pits, the whole site was now one big shanty-town with rows of military hutments, dining halls, sanitary wings. Thousands of people in every kind of civilian clothing peered, lazed, chatted or walked. Women were hanging washing between the huts. Children played shrilly.

The men at the table, ignoring a scene already too familiar, were listening to Vogler, who was reading from a typescript.

"This is a progress report. *Dædalus* signalled approach to Sol at eleven hundred hours on May the twelfth. The message told of success in reaching objective, but added that casualties had occurred; that extreme, if latent, personnel strain existed and that no official welcome should be laid on. At ten hundred hours on May the eighteenth the ship landed. Twenty minutes later, her captain reported to me at Adcenter. Fifteen minutes after that the crew of *Dædalus* began to deshup. At ten fifty-nine hours Commander

Spangler, first officer, reported the escape of the stowaway.

"Unfortunately no one saw the stowaway's face. The actual sighting was done by a rating, Travers, who had been deshipped and was crossing to the groundcar which was to take him and other crew to Medcenter. From the mess port he seemed to recognise a friend in the crowd; on coming out he doubled round the stern jets to contact him. He missed the friend; he was in time to see a figure wriggle from the stern waste lock and vanish into the crowd.

"Within ninety seconds the order had been given to close all exits, and effective control took another fifty seconds.

"The search of the ship that followed, showed the stowaway's hiding place—the stern gyro cell. That space is seldom entered by the crew, except on routine; its gear is only of use in the unlikely event of free fall, and, in fact, it was not visited once during the return flight. On this count, Captain Webster will meet a charge of neglect of space regulations. The charge will not be heard by

me, so I'm free to say what I think. Webster was 'edgy' as only a spaceman can be 'edgy'—and that goes for the whole crew. They had all had a ghastly experience. We who didn't visit Vega IV can't guess how extreme that experience was. There are times when the spoken word fails. We can only sense the deep mental hurt scored in these men.

"Having secured all the port exits, we were faced with the following situation. A lot of people—actually five thousand and eight hundred and ninety-six—were on our hands. The evidence of Space Rating Travers as to the appearance of the stowaway was faulty. The sight he had had as the man escaped from the waste lock was a fleeting one; all he can say positively is that it was a male figure, hatless, dressed in a nondescript zipper suit, possibly of dark grey or green. This evidence ruled out the women and children; but we took no chances. We contacted Washington and got a declaration of martial law; we declared the port a restricted area, brought in the

army construction corps, the catering corps and Special Investigation, under General Mark Weyland . . ."

A dark-haired, portly officer at the table looked up sharply at mention of his name and went on picking his teeth.

"Quarters were built for the internees within twenty-four hours. The interrogations were started within twenty-six hours. Every man, woman and child has been quizzed, the contents examined of every pocket, handbag or wallet and every story of outside connections checked. In five thousand, eight hundred and ninety-one cases evidence of identification has been established. We are left with five. Five men. Five cuckoos in the nest . . ."

Vogler pressed a switch; the room darkened slightly and an outside visor screen on the far wall sprang into life. It showed a tall, thin man sitting quietly in what looked like a prison cell.

"Gives his name as Aylmer Tolley—American."

The picture faded. Another followed. This time it was an

elderly tramp, dressed in a torn, grey zipper suit.

"Abe Regin—says he was born in Canada."

Another switch. Another prison cell. A bald, fat man, shabby, staring belligerently out of the screen.

"Peter O. Metternich—American."

The fourth internee was the most personable—a man of medium height in a fairly clean, grey suit; a well-shaved face; eyes that looked intelligent—even pleasant.

"This one says his name is Olwyn Kobe—American."

Lastly, a huge bear-like man with handlebar moustaches and large, stained teeth that were bared at the screen.

"Says he used to be a soda jerk. Name, Vladimir Vronski, American."

The last picture faded. "That's all," Vogler said.

"Those are the flotsam of our six-odd thousand. Alone of all those people, these five can't produce any evidence of identity that can be checked. They're men without roots—stealing for a living, but not recorded in any jail—working casually for a day or an hour,

but not known to any employer—sleeping where fancy takes them, but not recognisable by any apartment-keeper . . ."

"The suggestion, I guess, is this . . ." It was the swarthy General Weyland, who slipped his toothpick into a pocket and stared round the table. "One of those five is an alien—a man from the fourth planet of the Vegal system. We've heard what the *Dædalus* skipper thinks of the Vegans. I agree—if one of those men we've seen is from Vega IV, he must be a nasty piece of work. But two points stick. One—how can a Vegan humanoid get to look and act like an American hobo, not to mention speaking the language? Two—even if one of those men *is* from Vega IV, what harm can he do here? One man against a planet!"

Webster got up, excited, trembling. "I can answer!" he said, rapidly. "We got to Vega IV, and they let us go away again. *Now* we know why—it was to use us as a buggy-ride for their stow-away! Remember, they put us all in jail. They studied us

as only a race advanced in psych *can* study. They had time to duplicate our clothes. As for the second question—what can one man do against a planet?—the answer is another question: What can one typhoid germ do against a population? The Vegan alien is infinitely cunning, and one typhoid germ is infinitely deadly. No one knows what they managed to coax from our minds while we were on their planet. For all I know, they might already have the secret of the Drive. For all I know, this single alien, who seems to be one of those five hoboos, has been sent here to pave the way for invasion . . .”

“That’s going too far,” Wayland broke in. “*One man . . .*”

“You forget, I’ve met them,” Webster snapped. “I believe them capable of *anything*. If you told me that a Vegan had walked into the nearest spacecraft factory, hypnotised the entire staff, memorised completely the data of the latest prototype and walked out again—I’d believe you.”

“And how would this superman get back to his home planet?”

“On Webster’s line of thought,” put in Vogler, “he’d stow away again on the next star-ship and then urge the crew, hypnotically, to change course for Vega IV!”

Wayland snorted.

“I don’t believe it!”

“Let’s *assume* it,” Vogler said. “We’ve a nest with five birds. One of them is the cuckoo. But the cuckoo is also a perfect chameleon—so perfect that all ordinary tests can be ruled out . . .”

“If that implies *extra-ordinary* tests, I wouldn’t know what you mean.” It was the Senior Psych from the Specials who spoke, a sandy-headed colonel named Smith. “In my opinion, this calls for routine—plus commonsense. Put yourselves in the alien’s position. You want to adopt an Earth-American personality. A difficult project! You don’t complicate it further by choosing a personality more complex than you need. *You choose a fairly normal, fairly healthy personality.* By that I mean one conforming to existing modes—moderately adjusted and integrated socially, heterosexual in habit,

non-metaphysical in outlook, nicely balanced between altruism and individualism.

"Let's assume, by all means, that one of our five bums is the cuckoo. But consider first the only available source of his data—the crew of the *Dædalus*! Undoubtedly the whole crew was given a thorough going-over; undoubtedly its mass personality was laid bare. But what are the features of that personality? Why, health—normality!"

"So what?" asked Vogler.

"Don't you see? The most normal individual amongst that five must be our cuckoo. True, we haven't the psychic equipment of the aliens, but we've truth-drugs and psycho-analysis. Give me three days . . ."

But the extended examination of the five prisoners took a week. By that time the blameless thousands had been dispersed to their homes with official gifts and apologies; the huge, temporary town was being demolished. Now the experts were again in conference.

"We can do no more,"

announced Colonel Smith. "I assigned ten psychologists to the five subjects; doctors and patients are now exhausted, and I think you'll agree that the data is . . . not very decisive."

He consulted a sheaf of papers. "First, Aylmer Tolley. This subject has maniac-depressive tendencies, a guilt-complex . . . He's admitted nothing, but it would be queer if he hadn't attempted suicide more than once in the past."

"Second, Abe Regin. Here we've retarded development. Mental age about eleven. Partial illiteracy. On top of that, paranoic ideas of his own greatness.

"Third, Pete Metternich. Pronounced deviationist. Ethically a moron. Scarcely any social sense. A moral illiterate, if ever there was one.

"Fourth, Vladimir Vronski. Fairly high I.Q.—sixty-three—but has criminal bent. At least, part of him has. In other words, he's a schizo. The social part of him is unstable and might break down at any time. If that

happened he'd degenerate into a straight hysteric.

"Fifth, and last—Olwyn Kobe. A difficult subject. What the layman might call a colourless personality. There isn't much to report about him . . ."

"Then he's our man!" Webster said.

"Well, I wouldn't go so far——"

"But you said the most *normal* of those five must be——"

"I know what I said. Maybe I was too hasty; it's more complex than I thought . . ."

"Wouldn't you describe Kobe as normal?"

"Almost *too* normal."

"Well then——"

The colonel held up his hand. "I confess," he said, "that I was rash in suggesting this method. Now that the probing has been done, I see the flimsiness of the theory and the danger of acting on it. A man's liberty—possibly his life—is at stake . . ."

"But maybe the whole *planet's* at stake if——"

Webster was shouting.

"There's no need to lose

your temper, captain," Vogler interrupted. "I see what Colonel Smith means. We may be under military law, but that's no excuse for injustice. The fact is, we really haven't a test sufficiently decisive. I'm afraid we'll have to drop the whole project, and——"

"Have you all gone mad?"

"You've been under some strain, captain," Vogler said.

"I agree," nodded Weyland. "But the rest of us can't condemn a man without evidence."

"B-but . . ." Webster stuttered. He gazed wildly around the table and saw a circle of antagonistic faces.

"Don't you see? You're letting loose something infinitely cunning—infinately malevolent! Better shoot all five than risk that!"

"You described Vega IV as a cruel planet," Vogler said. "It seems that you've brought some of the cruelty home."

For a moment Webster stood gaping at the hostile faces. He drew in his breath sharply. In a calm voice, he said: "I've never seen those prisoners myself, except on the

screen. Is there anyone else here who *hasn't* visited the cells?"

"We all interviewed the prisoners before this meeting," Vogler answered. "Except you. You arrived late."

Webster stared hard. His lips moved.

"Posthypnosis!" he muttered.

"What's that?"

"Isaidposthypnosis! You're under the influence of the alien, all of you!"

Suddenly he leapt for the door. Vogler forestalled him; they fought for the handle like children, until Webster stiffened at the feel of a blaster tube in his ribs and his eyes met Weyland's.

"Get back," Weyland said, waving his blaster.

"Now listen." It was Colonel Smith. "Let's be sensible about this. You're upset, Webster, and we all sympathise; but there's *humanity* to be considered. Think of those five men—admit, if you like, that one of them might be the alien. Last week I had a theory—I thought that the most normal amongst the five must be our

man. But you told us yourself that the alien is infinitely cunning. *Therefore, he would have anticipated my theory*; he would have made us kill, say, Olwyn Kobe and let the real alien go free. Luckily, we in Special are cunning too. Kobe might just as well be innocent—the alien might easily be one of the other four."

"Or you can extrapolate," put in Weyland. "You can assume that *that* reasoning was, in turn, anticipated—which would make Kobe the alien after all. Further, you can assume that *that* conclusion was again anticipated—which would make . . ." He shrugged. ". . . The sort of padded-cell logic which is known as an infinite regress!"

"Quite," Vogler nodded. "We're back at the start. It's anybody's guess, and I for one won't authorise the killing of four innocent men for the sake of one guilty."

Weyland's blaster still covered Webster. The space-man was pale. "Someone said that certain things can't be put into words," he said. "Listen. I've seen things of such obscenity, such cold

nightmare, that..." The starship's captain broke down. His face puckered; tears came, and he sat abruptly and thrust his head into the shelter of his own arms, shoulders writhing under the silver-grey.

"Poor guy," Vogler said. He reached for the intercom. "Well, I guess we may as well turn those five loose."

After a rapid conversation he turned to the others.

"They're loose already! Someone let 'em out!"

"Who?" Weyland asked.

"Can't say. The detention sergeant's responsible, and he's going to pay for it."

"Felt sorry for them, perhaps," Smith said.

"There's no room for compassion," growled Vogler, "if it isn't in orders."

The being moved across Forty-second Street on its ten legs. It was tired; it had had a busy time.

First had been the trouble on disembarking, involving the need for instantaneous obliteration of a space-rating's memory. That had failed; the being had perforce to be

content with memory-alteration—the rating had been sent away with a memory of one stowaway instead of five.

Second, the effort of instilling compassion into eleven tough, military earth-types. But that, on the whole, had been rather easier than the space rating—much easier than the third, and apparently simple task, of persuading the detention sergeant to unlock the cells . . .

The being strung itself out in a half-mile line, led by the Executive. Behind him the Telepath gazed into the skulls of passers-by, tasting thoughts like droplets on the tongue; the Suggestor slouched through a throng that unconsciously made way; the Mnemonic-Semantist gazed into shop windows. Lastly, like one in an incorrigible state of absent-mindedness, the Computer dreamed on his way . . .

The Executive, the volition department of the commensal being, looked at the city with curiosity, noting the artifacts that crowded out so completely all natural planetary objects, watching the technical

display—the wheeled things that flowed, the sky-signs that flashed. He considered the Plan as delivered by the Computer—a ten days' soak in the planetary civics; the making of a fortune, another twenty days; the entry into politics—fifty days; the taking-over of the State—a hundred days; of the nation—two hundred days; of the planet—two years . . .

But first of all a groping-around, a spell to adjust itself to this noisy and crowded city, so different from any on the far home planet . . .

The Executive saw a sign across the street that spelled things to eat. It was necessary to eat. Behind him the Suggestor obediently stopped, began to sing in a tuneless baritone and held out a hat. With irresistible compulsion, each passer-by dropped something into the hat; within two

minutes it was filled to the brim with coins, dollar bills . . .

The Executive began to cross the street.

The traffic cop cleared a way for the ambulance. "The guy was plain nuts," he said, "—like he never seen a policeman in his life. There was I wavin' him back, and he just kept on."

"Maybe he was an Italian," an onlooker said. "Know what? Them Ities wave 'go away' when they mean 'come here'. I seen them do it."

"*That* guy won't beckon or wave," said the policeman. "Never no more."

A second ambulance went by.

"There's another down the street," someone said. "A dead hobo."

But there were five dead hoboos altogether . . .

*The fourth winner in our amateur author's
competition*

GO TO THE ANTS

by A. P. KIFT

I lit my pipe and threw the match over the verandah rail into the dust. The great African sun had lost its power and a silence hung over the bush. Two ants had run out from a hiding place and kicked dust over the still burning match until the flame had died. The sun had gone down now and the smooth velvet of a tropical night stole around me. For the hundredth time my mind recoiled with a creeping horror of the realisation that I was viewing a far more significant sunset in the history of mankind.

How different it had been ten years ago. Then a burning match would have scattered ants in all directions. But then the world had been at peace. The tragedy started with what the newspapers called the "Black Snowstorm" over Central Africa.

What made it tragic was that the world promptly forgot, and hence did not investigate this phenomenon. Soon reports of increasingly widespread destruction trickled—and then poured—from Central Africa. Wild animals of all kinds were abandoning their haunts and fleeing away from an evergrowing area. Termites were spreading from the region of Lake Victoria, a great, devouring wave reducing all vegetation to dust. It was only when small townships were swamped and consumed that governments paused, pondered, and then granted ridiculously small subsidies to Ministries of Agriculture. It was far too late, when at last, a State of Emergency was proclaimed and the idea was toyed with that the Army should be brought in to deal with the menace. By this time towns were devas-

tated. Thousands of animals shifted from their normal habitat, adding to the destruction; thousands of homeless inundated the coastal regions.

The Termites were found to have characteristics that caused biologists to ponder over their origin. They could emit a stream of acid which literally melted iron and steel. They were marshalled and directed in their operations by a commander who had subordinates and a bodyguard; and they had ten legs. Since these were not earthly creatures, the "Black Snowfall" was at last appreciated for what it was—an Invasion from Outer Space. By now the menace was becoming worldwide, whether by accidental transportation, or by a separate invasion having taken place. India, China and Brazil reported the symptoms which were ominously familiar to Africa.

At last we would have action—so we thought. Army flame throwers and Air Force bombers, using petrol bombs, were used, but weeks and weeks too late. These devilish creatures seemed to multiply

with unheard-of rapidity. They wanted room to live and eat. We had it. With our attacks on them we brought upon our heads another development. Until this time the invaders had been quite content to occupy vast territories, whence the inhabitants had been only too pleased to flee. Now that man had started to attack them, the Termites, with significant insight, realised that this would be the reaction of all mankind.

The news broke on a world which still refused to take this insect attack seriously and personally. Overnight horror and panic took the place of complacency, when, from isolated places, in the "occupied regions," reports came of whole town populations being surrounded and wiped out by the concentrated acid jets of these creatures. At last mankind was galvanised into action. Aircraft fitted with flame throwers were used in low flying sweeps in attempts to limit the spread of the invaders in much the same way as war is waged against a forest fire. The United Nations concentrated all its

forces on the vast area that was growing northwards and southwards. The whole of Africa was at last evacuated. Food producing areas in South America and Southern Asia were devastated, and famine spread to add to the plight of an overcrowded world population. Millions of black, brown and yellow faces turned to the north and south, and the United States and Europe shuddered at the horror of the chaos that was to come.

I was in the R.A.F. at that time, and took part in several long-range reconnaissance flights, photographing the main centres of activity in the South American region. Flying from Trinidad, we made wide sweeps over the Matto Grosso, the impenetrable jungle basin of the Amazon. Great "bald" patches could be seen in what had once been an unbroken world of green. In the centre of each patch fantastic "cities" could be seen, like gigantic anthills, spreading over miles, like a vast repulsive fungus. Even from the air, termite armies

were visible, setting forth in all directions, undulating rivers of insects, their shiny white bodies twinkling in the sun, moving with frightening precision. As we swooped down low to blast these myriads of unearthly creatures they fanned out expertly and were gone—perfectly dispersed—in a matter of seconds. They could adapt themselves with frightening rapidity.

For the first time in millions of years, the earthly ant had been faced with an astral enemy, which was invincible and threatened its survival. Slowly and surely they started to adapt themselves to meet this peril, and their adaptability speeded up with use. They learned from the enemy; they learned from man. Our photo-reconnaissance trips soon showed us mighty battlefields, carpeted with millions of bodies. The ants made straight for the enemy's breeding grounds, which, by a sixth sense, they seemed able to detect. They were the nearest earthly parallel to these tiny monsters from space, which possibly accounted for their immediate success. The

spreading termite armies drew back. A great contraction started in the all-devouring tentacles of the now gigantic termite race, which seemed to be some form of corporate creature in itself. Soon all that was left was the stink of rotting insects in the ruins of half a world.

How many years we strove to rebuild. The crippled economies of crippled nations, the want and starvation that engendered bitter wars brought after them the gradual settling again to a new normalcy, a sitting back and contemplating of man and his muddling through. The ants? They retreated to their natural home, with a new awareness

of their potentialities. And now?

I shift in my chair. The verandah creaks and my pipe is cold. Darkness has fallen and the bush is alive with tickings, gruntings and barkings. And out of that vibrating darkness I feel the eyes of myriads of ants contemplating man and his infirmities. The ants are exploring their new-found adaptability, their great self-confidence and self-awareness. They have saved mankind, unwittingly, from invaders from outer space, but when will they realise their power and man's frailty?

I go inside, put out the light and close the blinds to shut out those black woods.

AMATEUR WRITERS' SHORT STORY COMPETITION

Will all intending entrants to the above please note that this competition is now closed and no further MSS should be submitted.

Watch out for details of a new competition to be announced shortly



Projectiles

★★★ STAR LETTER ★★★

This should really be titled "The Revolt Against Space-Flight." I am quite convinced that space-flight will come. Even apart from the weight of scientific opinion that says so, it's obvious in itself.

But I'm not in the slightest bit interested.

There's nothing wonderful about flight. Nothing at all. I should imagine insects were doing it almost before the land was dry. Pterodactyls were certainly hard at it long before mammals came on the scene. Yet when man discovered flight for himself fifty years ago, it was hailed as a marvel. Rubbish. The only marvel about it was that the planet's highest form of life had taken so many millenia to discover it.

Now that man has flown, he can fly anywhere—all he needs is time.

It is inevitable, like equal pay for women, and semi-factual accounts of it are utterly boring and uninteresting. Like your series of cover-pictures.

I have nothing against these covers, as pictures, but the thing's been overdone. The first trip to the moon must surely be the most-written-about event in fact or fiction. You'll do nothing to hasten it. Nor will you, through surfeiting the public, do anything to postpone it. It'll come in its own good time—why not let it alone? Archie Mercer, c/o Birch Lea Cafe, Newark Road, Swinderby, near Lincoln.

Six non-fiction books should now be on their way to you, Mr. Mercer—your award for this month's Star Letter. Your comments will no doubt cause a flood of opinion from ASF readers. Somehow I think most of them will disagree with you.

Man's first flight into space is, as you say, inevitable. It is, however,

the most eagerly awaited event in the foreseeable future, riveting our attention and stirring our imagination.

ZENITH

Authentic gets better and better—when I thought you had already reached the zenith of improvement. I like your covers, “From Earth to the Stars,” and the paintings are as good as any anywhere.

Jon J. Deegan’s story in No. 37 was as good, if not better, than his usual stories. You can always rely on Deegan!

R. E. Smith, Summerhill Terrace, Newcastle-on-Tyne, 4.

I am glad that you like our covers, Mr. Smith, and note your liking for Science Fiction in the Deegan manner. More stories from Jon will be appearing in future issues.

DEEPER, PLEASE

If Science Fiction is to be taken seriously, the authors should probe a little deeper, or are they all atheists? If the creatures on other planets are entirely evil, then they are either devils or else they have no free will. On Earth, Man is the only creature with free will—and Man sometimes chooses evil, sometimes good, but more often a compromise of both.

If these creatures of other worlds can think, however unlike their thoughts may be to ours, then they are likely to be friendly, or otherwise, according to approach, and

equally likely to have dissensions among themselves. Can’t we get closer to probability in our Science Fiction?

M. M. Davison, Shadwell Road, North End, Portsmouth, Hants.

It would take a whole issue of Authentic even to begin a discussion of the points your letter suggests! But many of today’s science fiction writers are delving quite deeply enough for most of us, especially for those who read SF mainly for entertainment, and the enjoyment of speculation on future possibilities. But your point is well-made.

GLOOMY?

I liked “The Adaptable Man” better than Bryan Berry’s earlier work that I have read, but it suffers from the same gloomy theme as so many other stories—the hero (sometimes the whole human race) dominated, influenced or controlled by forces outside his control.

Stories in which the human race is the victim seem to me to be encouraging a form of naive scapegoatism, placing the blame for Man’s follies and present predicament upon exterior forces. No wonder science fiction is accused of being pure escapism!

As for the tales in which only an individual is so dominated, they seem to be indicative of the paranoid mentality, and I venture to suggest that they might have an adverse effect upon any reader

who may have a slight bias towards paranoid thought.

Paul L. Sowerby, Lansdowne Road, West Didsbury, Manchester, 20.

We are glad you liked "The Adaptable Man."

But surely you're not serious when you suggest that this, and stories in a similar vein will drive our readers to the psychoanalyst. We haven't heard that it's happened yet!

STRANGE PHENOMENA

I should like to correspond with anyone interested in psychological and parapsychological subjects, with the idea of exchanging reports and results of experimental work in connection with strange phenomena of mind and brain. Can telepathy be put to practical use? Is telekinesis possible? Can we see forward into Time? Arthur Cook, 45 Derby Street, Blackburn, Lancs.

We hope you will have plenty of replies, Arthur. And why not let Authentic readers hear about your experiments in these fascinating subjects?

FANWORDS?

Now that SF Handbook has come to an end, how about a dic-

tionary of fandom expressions? Fanzine writers love initials—and all those abbreviations! You could incorporate all those words *invented* by SF writers.

Miss Ethel Lindsay, 126 West Regent Street, Glasgow.

We are always pleased to have your suggestions, Ethel, and have made a note of this one—although I doubt whether there is sufficient material here for a regular feature.

BACK NUMBERS

Do you think any of your readers could help me fill in the gaps in my collection of *Authentic*—at cost, of course. I require Nos. 1 to 14 and 16 to 20.

Harold Devine, 2 Kittermaster Rd., Munden, Nr. Coventry.

If any readers have back numbers up to and including No. 18, and also Nos. 21, 22, 23, and 25 to 28, I would be willing to buy them if they will contact me. I would also like a penfriend abroad (20—21).

A/B B. G. White, P/SSX839474, 16 Mess, H.M.S. Jamaica, c/o F.M.O., Portsmouth.

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is the sixth in our new series of documentary paintings. It depicts man's first approach to another planet — Mars. The ship is a space-to-space rocket-powered vessel, lacking wings and fins which are required only in flying through atmospheres. This rocket, huge and a little gawky, sets out from a satellite station near Earth and travels through the near-vacuum of space to just above the atmosphere of Mars. There, it goes into an orbiting ellipse and circles the red planet until it is time to leave.

A massive metal sphere at one end of the ship houses the crew and the laboratories. Here are carried out observations of the planet and its two moons, examination of the upper atmosphere and the chemistry and physics of space.

At the other end of the ship a second metal sphere contains small rocketships that will go down and land on the surface of Mars. Here also are the large quantities of fuel that the small ships will need. Fuel for the space-to-space ship is carried in the cylindrical tanks attached to girders between the two spheres.

The small ships will be flown by men whose job it will be to set up man's first planetary colony—the Mars Base. Of course, it will be many years before the initial tiny settlement becomes a thriving town—and may be many decades before other towns spring up around it—just as happened here on Earth in Canada and Australia in the days of the pioneers. But we need have no doubt that it will happen, that men will endure the heavy hardships of the wilds and will maintain their grip on the almost barren land of Mars.

Next month's cover will depict a preliminary landing on one of the moons of Mars.

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